

STAYING OR LEAVING?

A report from the project ‘Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work: towards gender justice in educational and youth policies and programs’

**An Australian Research Council Project 2002–
2004**

**June 2005
University of South Australia**

Monash University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers involved in this study, Alison Mackinnon (University of South Australia), Jane Kenway (Monash University), Julie Mcleod and Andrea Allard (Deakin University), wish to thank the Australian Research Council for its support. We also wish to thank the participating schools and staff, who for reasons of confidentiality we cannot name. Without the support of interested and concerned principals, counselors and teachers neither the selection of participants nor the interviews could have been undertaken. We thank the schools for their co-operation and hospitality. In various settings service providers also gave willingly their time and knowledge. We thank them too.

We are specially grateful to the many young women and their mothers who took part in the study. Many of the mothers in particular did so as they hoped the study would make a difference to the lives of their daughters and other young women considered 'at risk' of early school leaving and its attendant disadvantages. We offer this report as one of the outcomes of the project which might provide a basis for change in attitudes to young women 'at risk'.

Over the years of the project several researchers worked closely with us. We wish to thank in particular Elizabeth Bullen, Danni Nicholas-Sexton and Katie Wright who shared much of the research journey. Recently Candice Oster has joined the team with her report writing skills. Thank you all of you.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have seen many positive changes in the educational experiences of young women. Yet there remain significant issues regarding young women's schooling that still need to be addressed, particularly in relation to marginalised young women. One such issue is leaving school early, where young women who leave school early face the prospect of serious economic disadvantage relative to other young people. In this report we present aspects of the findings from a study investigating the educational, labour market and social experiences of disadvantaged young women living in the urban/rural fringe. The focus of the report is on the findings regarding young women's experiences of early school leaving, and the critical issues that impact on their decision to leave or stay at school. We incorporate a unique cross-generational perspective to these experiences by presenting the views of the young women's mothers or mother figures.

METHODOLOGY

The methods used in this research were predominantly qualitative, but also incorporated demographic and socio-economic data. The study was undertaken in two states (Victoria and South Australia) focusing on sites located at the urban/rural fringe. While the findings were similar across both states, in this report we focus on the South Australian cohort. Six sets of participants were involved in the study: young women at school; the mother/figures of young women at school; young women who are post-school; the mother/figures of the young women post-school; local teachers and youth service providers. Study participants were recruited from two different areas in the urban/rural fringe of South Australia. A total of 28 young women, 18 mothers, and 13 teachers and service providers were recruited in South Australia.

FINDINGS

The study findings are presented thematically, focusing on critical issues identified by the participants as impacting on their schooling. By accessing the views of the young women as well as their mothers, we also provide insight into the continuities and discontinuities in young women's experiences of these issues across the generations.

An important continuity across the generations relates to the likelihood of early school leaving and young motherhood for the young women, which were common experiences in the lives of their mothers. Cross-generational continuities and discontinuities were also found in relation to decisions about early school leaving. We identified four critical issues that impact on the decision to stay at school or leave early, namely: 1. Meeting basic needs; 2. The school environment; 3. The social environment; 4. The desire/need to work.

1) MEETING BASIC NEEDS

This theme refers to the ways in which the desire to finish school is overcome, in some instances, by the young women's need to have their basic psychological and physical needs met. These basic needs include the need for safety, security, care, respect and trust. In many cases these needs were not being met, with many of the young women and their mothers reporting experiences of physical and psychological trauma. These experiences make it extremely difficult for the young women to remain at school.

2) SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

A common school factor identified in this study was the difficulty experienced in the transition from primary to high school. It was common for the young women to talk about finding primary school relatively easy, but then experiencing difficulties with their schoolwork as they progress through high school. Being bored at school and finding subjects pointless and irrelevant were also issues identified by both the young women and their mothers. Another school factor impacting on the decision of young women and their mothers to leave school early relates to the complex and sometimes conflicting relationships the participants had with their teachers.

3) SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The social environment of the school is another critical issue that impacted on the young women's decisions to stay at school or leave early. There are two aspects of the impact of the school environment, which were also discussed by their mothers. The first relates to bullying, fighting, and a non-academic oriented social environment. This aspect helped drive young women and their mothers out of school. The second relates to the importance of friendship to young women at this stage of life, and the ability of strong friendships to help keep young women at school for longer.

4) DESIRE / NEED TO WORK

The desire or need to work is a factor that has the capacity to pull young people out of school and into the workforce before completing their schooling. While this factor was not particularly significant for the young women who were still at school, it was a factor that impacted on some of the post-school young women's decisions to leave school early, and was most evident in the interviews with the mothers. Unfortunately, the economic environment when the mothers were leaving school was one in which the likelihood of them finding work was relatively high when compared to the current economic context. Today's young women who are leaving school early face the serious prospect of unemployment, or at best only part-time and/or casual employment.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

In this report we identify issues for consideration by schools and service providers that are grounded in the themes identified by the young women themselves as impacting on their ability to stay at school. These issues relate to *the importance of friendships, the impact of mothers, the importance of meeting basic needs* and *the use of support services*. A series of questions is presented for each of these issues for consideration by schools and service providers. Finally, we offer support for the continuation and extension of existing programs for the provision of alternative education pathways for early school leavers.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BROADER STUDY

The past few decades have seen many positive changes in the educational experiences of young women. As a result, governments and policies both in Australia and overseas are now more concerned with the education of boys (Epstein, Elwood, Hey et al. 1998; Mackinnon, Elgqvist-Saltzman and Prentice 1998; Australian Government 2000). However, there remain significant issues regarding young women's schooling that still need to be addressed, particularly in relation to the experiences of marginalised young women. In this report we present aspects of the findings from a study investigating the educational, labour market and social experiences of disadvantaged young women living in the urban/rural fringe. Two main categories of young women were researched: early-school leavers who are marginally attached to the labour force, unemployed or out of the labour force; and students still at school but considered 'at risk' of joining the 'disadvantaged' first group.

Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Explore the experiences of young women who have left school early, and those identified as 'at-risk' of early leaving, who live in the urban/rural fringe in South Australia and Victoria;
- Compare their schooling experiences with those of their mothers (or mother figures) in order to analyse cross-generational continuities, disruptions and contradictions;
- Explore the perceptions that teachers and other key youth service providers, such as youth and employment agency workers, have of these young women and their mother/figures, in order to provide background information and advice;
- Offer insight into ways in which education and youth services may best assist young women to deal with the difficulties their circumstances evoke, and promote justice in schooling and youth services.

A number of publications have arisen out of the broader study, and these are detailed in Appendix 1. In this report we focus on the findings relating to the South Australian young women's experiences of early school leaving, and the critical issues that impact on their decision to leave or stay at school. We begin with an overview of the research methods adopted in the broader study, before introducing the topic of early school leaving. This is followed by a presentation of the study findings as they relate to the young women's decisions about early school leaving, in which we incorporate a unique cross-generational perspective of young women's decisions. Finally, we offer a range of issues for consideration based on these findings.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Given our concern with the schooling experiences of disadvantaged young women, we located the study in areas in which young people, and particularly young women, experience marginalisation. We decided to focus the study on the urban/rural fringe in two Australian states, South Australia and Victoria. The rural and urban are commonly positioned as binary opposites in Western thought. As both objects of and sites for research, they are often presented as discrete categories with their own unique geospatial and sociospatial identities. But what of the urban/rural fringe, the site where the city and country converge? Although the urban-rural fringe has long been a subject of formal inquiry, it is under studied, 'partly because it is too urban to attract the traditional rural researchers and too rural to incite urban scholarly inquiry'

(Audirac 1999, p. 7). The urban/rural fringe is a socio-economically marginal region, often on the margins of the labour market. This means that there are fewer employment opportunities, particularly for young people. The urban/rural fringe is also located at the margins in terms of transport. Areas in the urban/rural fringe therefore provide useful points of access into the experiences of marginalised young women.

METHODOLOGY

The methods drawn on in this research were predominantly qualitative, but also drew upon demographic and socio-economic data. Distinctively we added an historical dimension to sociological approaches, exploring cross-generational aspects of the experiences of disadvantaged young women. Further, we added an action orientation, which as Wood (2000) indicates, is a vital component of work with marginalised young people. This allowed us to identify possible directions for future support practices and policy based on the data generated from the young people and the teachers and service providers themselves. We adopted a multi-method approach to our data collection, and a multi-layered approach to analysis. Critical and ongoing reflection on the effects of the different research approaches –on the participants, on the kind of knowledge generated– was built into the analysis of observations and data. The fieldwork was carefully designed to allow the project to build incrementally and offered maximum yield in terms of data, analysis and theory.

The study was undertaken in two states (Victoria and South Australia) focusing on sites located at the urban/rural fringe. The sites were determined on the basis of published studies that ranked areas of disadvantage. For this purpose we employed the ABS collations *South Australia's Young People, 1996* (ABS 1998) and *Victoria's Young People 1996* (ABS 1998). As we are focusing on South Australia in this report, we will only be discussing the collection of data in this state.

RECRUITMENT

In this study we gathered data from six sets of participants:

- Young women at school;
- The mother/figures of young women at school;
- Young women who are post-school;
- The mother/figures of the young women post-school;
- Local teachers;
- Youth service providers.

Study participants were recruited from two different areas in the urban/rural fringe of South Australia. The young women who were still at school, and their mothers, were recruited from a school in one of the urban/rural areas. These girls were in years 8 and 9 and aged between 13 and 15 years, and were identified by their teachers as being 'at-risk' of leaving school early. The post-school girls cohort and their mothers were recruited through a Young Mothers Program at an adult re-entry college in one of the sites. We sought the assistance of local youth service providers to recruit the post-school young women, and to provide background information and advice. A total of 28 young women, 18 mothers and 13 service providers were recruited in South Australia.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was gathered from each group of participants in different ways, with most data being gathered from the young women. The data collection was as follows (details of the research techniques are

provided below):

- Young women at school (n=9) — Introductory focus group, interviews (2 each), reflective focus group;
- The mother/figures of the at-school young women (n=9) — Interviews (2 each), reflective focus group;
- Young women who were post school (n=19) and their mothers (n=9) — ‘Students-as-researchers’ methodology (Edwards 2005);
- Local teachers and youth service providers (n=13) — Two focus groups (n=10) and written feedback (n=3).

DETAILS OF RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

1. Delineating the context. In each research locality, we developed a *youth services snapshot* and an analysis of *local socio-demographic data*. The youth services snapshots involved an audit of existing educational (formal and informal) and youth services, identifying their purposes, funding sources, staffing and longevity. These served three purposes. First, they assisted us to make the contacts necessary to identify potential participants among local post-school young women. Second, they helped us to identify participants for the youth service provider focus groups. Third, they provided a backdrop for the discussions with the young women and their mother/figures about their engagement with such forms of provision. A broader but nonetheless still local backdrop was developed through a collation of local socio-demographic data. This included data commissioned from the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ 2001 Census.

2. Interviews were the major data source and were conducted with the at-school young women and their mother/figures. In order to prompt rich, historically focused responses early, we employed *lifeline methods* in the first interview: these methods are used extensively in Scandinavian work on gender and education. Each person was invited to fill out a ‘life line’ chart, locating key events in relation to their social fields of paid and unpaid work, family, education and social services (Bjeren and Elgqvist-Saltzman 1994). In studying young women and their mothers we aimed to capture ‘life as process’, ‘to catch the past in the making’ (Bjeren and Elgqvist-Saltzman 1994, p. 17), to elicit personal biographical narratives, and life history trajectories. In seeking participants’ narratives, each is understood as an authority on her own biographical project. Historians (e.g. Steedman 1986) have found this cross-generational approach particularly productive.

3. Focus groups were used with the at-school young women, their mother/figures and the teachers and youth service providers. *Teachers and youth service providers’ focus groups* took the conventional form (Krueger and Casey 2000) and were tape-recorded and transcribed. They were designed to provoke discussion on teachers’ and youth service providers’ perceptions of local ‘at risk’ young women, issues they confront across generations, their views of the inscriptions of ‘social justice’ both in the services they provide to and the relationships they have with these young women and their mothers. The prompts to assist discussion were ‘synthesised case histories’ of a range of ‘ideal type’ young women (not real young women), which we developed from our analysis of data previously gathered. These transcripts were analysed according to the themes noted above.

4. The *focus groups with the at-school young women and their mothers* took two forms. The first was an *introductory focus group* and was only for the young women as it is their concerns and experiences that are the foundational focus of the study. These focus groups sought to ‘break the ice’, begin trust building and offer us some preliminary insights about the young women, their

views of their locality and the support services it does or does not provide them. We used specifically designed audio-visual prompts that drew from popular culture and thus readily provoked discussion. In the second focus group for the young women and their mothers (conducted separately), 'synthesised case histories' (as above) were presented and participants were invited to *reflect* on them in the light of what the case histories 'say' about young women, social injustice and justice across time and place. Because they were crucial to our analysis, the introductory and reflective focus groups were taped and transcribed. Detailed field notes were kept for all focus groups, documenting atmosphere and the 'unsaid' responses. We were mindful of how focus groups as a method have been problematised in recent literature as inhibiting divergent responses (Harrison 2000), but by employing a combination of research approaches we aimed to minimise some of these methodological risks

5. Students-as-researchers. The post-school young women participated as 'students as researchers'. This methodology (Edwards 2005) involved the students being trained in interview techniques, after which they interviewed each other and interviewed their mothers. The research team then went to the school and interviewed some of the young women and the mothers. Finally, there was a feedback session with the post-school young women and their mothers, and a ceremony in which certificates were given to all the young women who participated in the project.

To aid our ongoing analysis of this data, the interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed.

ETHICS

Approvals from universities and education departments were sought and obtained. All identifying information has been removed, and pseudonyms have been used in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

INTRODUCTION TO THIS REPORT

Despite increased retention of young people at school since the early 1980s, early school leaving continues to be an important issue in Australia. According to the Dusseldorp Skills Forum on how young Australians are faring, '... in the short term early school leavers are significantly more likely to struggle in their initial transition [from school] than are Year 12 leavers' (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004, p. 15). This is particularly the case for young girls who leave school early, with these girls being 'more likely to be engaged in marginal activities than males by about one and a half percentage points' (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004, p. 17).

The retention of young people at school is an issue that has attracted the concern of schools, government and youth organizations (McMillan and Marks 2003). For example, the Government of South Australia recently released an Action Strategy (titled 'Making the Connections') aimed at maintaining young people's connection to learning and opportunities (Government of South Australia 2004). In order to maintain this connection, however, it is important to gain the views of young people themselves on how they feel about school, and why they might choose to leave school early. As McMillan and Marks point out, asking young girls directly about their experiences of school can 'provide a greater understanding of the influences on school leaving' (2003, p. 100).

The focus of this report is on critical issues impacting on young women's decisions about staying at school or leaving early, from the perspectives of young women themselves. We also explored the experiences of these young women's mothers/mother figures in order to offer a cross-generational perspective. In this section we discuss contextual issues relating to early school leaving, particularly as it pertains to young women. This contextual information forms part of the study, providing the setting for the schoolgirls, the post-school young women and the mothers' stories.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

The decade between 1982 and 1992 saw a significant increase in school retention rates in Australia (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000). Despite this increase, however, school retention remains an important issue in Australia. There is a significant economic impact on young people who leave school early (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000; Marks and McMillan 2001; McMillan and Marks 2003; Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004), and this is particularly the case for young women. Young women who live at the margins of work and education experience serious economic disadvantage relative to other young people (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000). For example, Marks and McMillan (2001) conducted a study of who leaves school early, why this is so, and what the consequences for early school leaving may be. They found that while 67% of non-completers in their study were in full time work, only 55% of female non-completers were working full-time compared to over three-quarters of male non-completers. Despite the significance of early school leaving for young women, however, there is little current research in Australia that has a direct focus on these young women as they move through and beyond school.

CROSS-GENERATIONAL ISSUES

This study offers a contribution to existing literature in that it explores generational change as it

relates to young women's experiences of early school leaving. This is particularly important as the social universe experienced by these women differs significantly to that experienced by their mothers. The mothers of the young women interviewed for this study attended school during the 1960s and 1970s. Mendes (2003) sums up the changes in work and society since the 1970s as follows: significant labour market changes characterized by high levels of unemployment, including significant numbers of long-term unemployed and increased participation of women in the work place; an associated decline in blue-collar manufacturing jobs and the emergence of the 'knowledge economy' based on technological innovation; changes in family structure, including more divorce and sole parent families; and the rise of individualism at the expense of tradition and post-war collectivism. Finally, there is the projected ageing of the population and the corresponding decline in fertility with the potential to add to costs of supporting large numbers of older citizens (Mendes 2003, p. 73). Another important change in the experiences of young school leavers today is the growth in part-time employment for young people, and an increasing difficulty for young people to obtain full-time employment (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004). While these changes affect young people across the board, they have greater significance for young women who leave school early, as the above discussion of the economic impact of early school leaving suggests.

A further cross-generational issue relates to the commonly understood association between teenage pregnancy and early school leaving, and current concern in Australian society about 'welfare mums' (Bullen and Kenway 2004). The 1970s saw increasing provision of welfare for disadvantaged members of society, with the single mothers' benefit being a highly desired aim of the women's movement. Yet with the growth of the neo-liberal New Right we have seen the resurrection of the age-old English Poor Laws distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, with the 'undeserving' poor renamed the 'underclass' (Bullen and Kenway, 2004). There is now a stigma attached to early childbearing (despite increasing concerns with fertility) and the provision of welfare to young single mothers.

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

As McMillan and Marks point out, '... strategies to increase school retention and facilitate smooth transitions from school to work have been the subject of much policy interest in recent years' (2003, p.86). The Australian government's focus is on developing policies to increase the retention of young people in school and other forms of education. The introduction of the Youth Allowance, which requires young people (aged 16-17) to participate in education or training in order to receive income support, has made it even more important for young people to stay at school or undertake alternate forms of education.

As mentioned earlier in the report, while the study was undertaken in both South Australia and Victoria, we will be focusing here on the South Australian context. The key educational priorities for the South Australian government are reducing absenteeism and improving school retention. There are a number of policies and initiatives relevant to these aims, including the following:

- *Making the Connections* (Government of South Australia 2004), a new strategy to increase school retention rates;

- *Attendance Improvement Package* (Department of Education and Children's Services 2003), providing guidance and practical information to support recording, reporting, analysis and planning;
- *Social inclusion Initiative* (<http://www.socialinclusion.sa.gov.au>). In March 2002, the Premier established the Government's Social Inclusion Initiative, setting up the Social Inclusion Unit to provide advice on school retention rates, among other issues;
- *Futures Connect* (Department of Education and Children's Services 2002), provides 13-19 year-old students with access to the services and mentorship of various partners and with a set of tools for planning their future;
- *Strategic Plan July 2000 – June 2003* (Department of Education and Children's Services 2001);
- *Foundations for the Futures* (Department of Education and Children's Services 2001), a declaration for South Australian public education and children's services to 2010 and the basis of system level planning;
- *School Discipline* (Department of Education and Children's Services 1996), aims to create learning communities which are safe, inclusive, free of bullying, and conducive to learning;
- *Student Participation* (Department of Education and Children's Services 1996), concerns the participation of students in decision making about their learning, classroom management and organization;

Having presented a context for the findings presented in this report, we now turn to a discussion of these findings.

FINDINGS

The study findings are presented here in a thematic framework, focusing on critical issues identified by the participants as impacting on their schooling. When faced with the choice of staying or going, there are a number of critical issues that impact on this decision for the young women, in particular the need to meet basic needs, the impact of the school environment and the social environment on this decision, and the desire/need to work. Some of the critical issues identified in this study have been found in other studies of early school leavers (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000; Blackmore, Angwin, Shacklock et al. 2003; McMillan and Marks 2003). However, this study focuses specifically on young women's experiences and understanding of these issues, and importantly, it offers a cross generational perspective that is absent from other studies. By accessing the views of the young women as well as their mothers we provide a unique insight into the continuities and discontinuities in these women's lives across generations.

CROSS-GENERATIONAL ISSUES

Before exploring the critical issues impacting on the young women's decisions about early school leaving, we begin with a discussion of the cross-generational experiences of early school leaving and young motherhood. A common theme across the interviews with the young women was the desire to be different to their mothers, particularly in terms of the mothers' working and family lives. For example, it was common for the at-school girls to talk about wanting a different job to their mothers, and wanting to begin their family later in life (i.e. in their early 20s) and have fewer children. Some young women talked about wanting to be different to their mothers in terms of career path, but similar to their mothers in other respects. For example, when asked if she wanted to be like her mother, one young woman in the at-school cohort responded:

Um in a way, yeah, I do; in a way I don't – with the career she took and that – but in a way, yeah, I do ... just cool and understanding and stuff like that, yeah.
(Bronwyn, p. 15)

The mothers also want their daughters to have a different life to them. They want their daughters to stay at school, or go back to school if they've already left, and undertake further education. They also want their daughters to wait until later in life to have children. Yet despite this desire for difference, an important continuity across the generations of participants in this study relates to early school leaving and young motherhood.

Out of the 18 mothers that were interviewed in South Australia, all but 2 had left school before completing Year 12. Many of mothers also had their first child at a young age, with the age of first pregnancy in this group ranging from 16 to 25 years. Similarly, in the post-school cohort, fifteen of the girls have children (or have been pregnant and miscarried), with the age of first pregnancy ranging from 14 to 24 years.

While the young women in the at-school group talked about waiting until they were older to have children, in some cases there was a sense of not having control over their lives in this respect. For example, Brigitte talked about her ambitions to finish school and become

a chef. She describes the main obstacle to this ambition being lack of access to the right training, but also mentions that falling pregnant could disrupt her plans, as has happened to people around her. Kirsty also talked about early childbearing, saying that while she hopes to go to university she doesn't think it will happen. Instead she suspects she'll 'just be at home with some kids and not have a job'. While she knows of young women who have had babies at 14, she feels 16 or 17 would be a more suitable age, and she wouldn't mind having children at that age. As discussed previously, early childbearing is not seen as respectable despite growing concerns about fertility in Australia, which can lead to stigmatisation of women who have children early.

A further cross-generational continuity relates to attitudes towards school completion. The young women and their mothers interviewed for this study recognised the importance of school completion, particularly in terms of the future economic benefits of completion. Most of the young women still at school expressed the desire to stay at school at complete Year 12. For some this was because of the need to complete Year 12 in order to achieve their career goals. Alice, for example, would like to work with children or animals and realises that she must complete Year 12 to achieve her goal. Lillian also wants to finish school and go to university so that she can have 'a different life' to her mother and older sister who both left early.

The mothers also expressed a strong desire for their daughters to complete their schooling. One mother commented that her daughter 'knows I'm adamant that she's staying at school' (At-school mother's focus group, p. 1). Yet despite this stated desire, the participants had either left school early, or were at risk of doing so. When faced with the possibility of their daughters making the decision to leave, the mothers talked about supporting their daughters' decision because they want their children to be happy. One mother also talked about her daughter having to make her own decisions and feeling unable to influence her. She stated:

... yeah we'd love them to stay at school obviously and do the best that they can, but then ultimately in the end what can we do? And they get to a certain age and they make decisions for themselves anyway so you can only try and guide them along, can't you, but like you said so ultimately in the end if they're happy, whatever certain age they get to, you can't make them do any more. (At-school mothers' focus group, p. 1)

This view was reflected in the interviews with the at-school girls, one of whom responded as follows when asked if her mother wants her to stay at school:

Yeah, she does think I should do that. But if it was my choice to leave she would be with me. She doesn't push me into anything I don't want to. She's just, what would you call it? Like accepts me for what I want to do and everything like that. (Bronwyn, p. 4)

In the sections to follow we discuss the critical issues impacting on the participants' decisions about staying or leaving school early. In addition to the continuities discussed above, there are further cross-generational continuities, and discontinuities, in the young women's and their mothers' experiences of early school leaving. In each of the following subsections we incorporate a cross-generational view into our discussion of the critical issues impacting on the young women's decisions about staying at school or leaving early.

MEETING BASIC NEEDS

One reason for the young women deciding to leave school early relates to the theme of meeting basic needs. This theme refers to the ways in which the desire to finish school is overcome, in some instances, by the young women's need to have their basic psychological and physical needs met. These basic needs include the need for safety, security, care, respect and trust.

While nearly all of the participants, both the young women and their mothers, recognised the importance of completing their schooling for the sake of their future lives, in many cases their immediate circumstances were such that their early leaving is not surprising. In fact it can be argued that in some instances, the decision to leave school early is a rational response to a difficult situation. The interviews with the post-school girls provide examples of the extent to which basic needs are not met for some young women. Some of these young women reported experiencing sexual abuse, molestation, rape, and teenage pregnancy. They also noted disrupted family patterns, frequently changing schools, death of close friends and family, mental and physical illness and disability as impacting on their schooling.

The experiences of two of the post-school young women stand out as examples of the extremes to which the need to stay at school can be eclipsed by experiences of psychological and physical trauma. Kara is 26 and left school when she was 15. She identified a number of key turning points in her life that occurred prior to her leaving school. These include being molested by a babysitter when she was in primary school, losing her virginity at age 11, terminating a pregnancy at age 13 and leaving home at 15. Sandra is 23 and left school at 15. Prior to leaving school she reports taking drugs at age 10, child prostitution, which she quit at age 13, and anorexia. She was diagnosed manic-depressive at age 16.

There is some cross-generational continuity with this theme as a number of the mothers we interviewed also had similar experiences. Sally, for example, was adopted by her paternal grandparents at age 4. From age 2, she and her baby brother lived in a home. They were removed from their parents because her father was working away from home and her mother had a nervous breakdown. Her parents were 17 years old at the time. Louise, too, had a difficult childhood, moving out of home at age 13 after being sexually abused by her father and living in various state institutions and halfway houses before living on the streets. Leaving home early was a fairly common experience of the mothers and the post-school girls, and some of the at-school girls also talk about wanting to move out of home early.

While the girls in the at-school cohort rarely discussed difficult life-experiences, aside from family breakdown and difficult family relationships (nearly all of the participants' parents had separated), their experience of more serious life events such as violence and sexual abuse were raised in the interviews with their mothers. For example, Claire, whose 15-year-old daughter is at risk of early school leaving, talked about attending a 'victims of crime' support group with her children to help them deal with the aftermath of domestic violence and abuse. The mothers of two of the other young women reported that their daughters had experienced sexual assault, and in one instance both mother and daughter have been prescribed anti-depressants.

This theme of meeting basic needs demonstrates an important point about existing policies around early school leaving. These policies tend to focus on retaining young people at school or in other forms of education for as long as possible. For example, the 'Futures Connect' initiative (mentioned earlier) aims to help young people develop a set of tools to plan their pathways to achievement and successful transition from school. This initiative does not sufficiently acknowledge that some young people experience disrupted and troubled lives that make school a low priority in their efforts to simply survive. For some young women, leaving school early is one way in which they can meet their basic needs, particularly by leaving home in order to escape abuse. For others the decision is made to leave school so that there is one less stress for them to deal with in an already over-stressed life. Therefore, while the push to retain young people at school for as long as possible has strengths, it is only valuable to the extent that it is recognised that there are times when young people will leave school because of needing to meet their basic needs ahead of their learning needs.

Family health problems, conflict, breakdown and loss must be recognized as factors that are highly likely to detach young women from school. Under such circumstances it is vital that schools acknowledge these matters and are sufficiently flexible to offer a variety of different modes through which young women may stay connected to education. Schools have to tread a fine line here as on some occasions they are seen as too interfering and on others as not caring enough. On some occasions mothers and daughters want the school to understand that they are having problems, yet they may not want to explain the problems to the school. Both feel betrayed if their problems become common knowledge among staff. Equally, student welfare needs to be seen as integral to student learning. Unless their basic needs are acknowledged and met in a respectful manner, their attachment to school and their learning will be minimal.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The school environment is another important factor that impacts on the young women's decisions about staying or leaving school and it was common for the young women to feel alienated by the school environment and thus to withdraw from it even when present at school. Indeed, some became involved in a form of self exclusion which they saw as forced on them by the school.

A common school factor identified in this study was the difficulty experienced in the transition from primary to high school. Many of the participants, both at-school and post-school girls, described finding the transition to high school difficult. It was common for the girls to talk about finding school easy and achieving high grades in primary school (and even in Year 8), but then experiencing difficulties with their schoolwork as they progress through high school. Being bored at school and finding subjects pointless and irrelevant were also issues identified by some of the at-school students. These issues were also discussed by the mothers of the at-school girls, and as one mother stated:

So the subjects that they're doing that they hate, and it's like a job. I don't know anybody that would work in a job if they hate it, would you? I mean if you had to turn up every day for this job that was tedious, you couldn't stand the boss, I mean you would not want to work there, and it's basically what they're going through. They're still human, they still have feeling ... (At-school mothers' focus group, p. 2)

Another school factor impacting on the decision to leave school early relates to the complex relationships the participants had with their teachers. Some participants described that the teachers spent too much time trying to control 'the naughty kids' (Josie) and failed to focus on making sure students understand the work. In contrast, others felt that the teachers were only interested in the 'good students' and were dismissive of those who were struggling with their work. Trust was an important aspect of the teacher-student relationship identified by the participants, with emphasis placed on teachers who the young women could confide in without fear that their personal problems would be broadcast to other teachers. Some participants felt that they could approach some teachers about schoolwork but that they couldn't trust the teachers with their personal problems. For others, the opposite was the case, where teachers could be approached about personal issues but not for help with schoolwork.

Direct conflict with teachers was particularly evident in the interviews, including those with the mothers. Many participants, young women and mothers, identified themselves as 'loudmouths' who stand up to their teachers and get sent out or leave class. A number of young women engaged in such activities as self and other respect strategies. They were heavily invested in not being 'pushed around' and in not to be seen to be being pushed around. Indeed, 'standing up for your self' is understood by some daughters and mothers and as a cultural imperative; a survival strategy. Participants also described being picked on by teachers. This conflict can be seen in the interviews with some of the at-school participants. Alice, for example, described yelling at teachers as a way of 'getting all my anger out and telling the teachers what I really think'. She also talked about how she deals with her anger by walking out of class. Marni described feeling singled out by teachers because, as she noted: 'I have a loud personality so ... teachers think they can make an example out of me'. Bronwyn talked about her math teacher yelling at her and her friends for talking quietly in class:

And then we always get into an argument too because we stick up for ourselves. It just makes you feel like the teacher is picking on you. Cause he let the really, really good students talk and stuff. But he won't let us sort of thing. It's weird. It just feels like being picked on. (Bronwyn, p. 2)

Participants in the post-school cohort also identified conflict with teachers as a factor in their decision to leave school. Diane, who left school at 16, reported that by this time she was not coping with her schoolwork and the pressure of exams, and that she was exploding at the teachers. A student counselor referred her to a psychologist who told her: 'It's best you leave school ... if you don't leave school, you are going to explode at your teachers'. Mothers also reported similar experiences. For example, Claire relates that any problems the students had with teachers when she was at school were not listened to or addressed, and that the teachers were little better than the students when it came to violence and verbal abuse. Karen talked about how she 'just had an attitude' which led to conflict with teachers and disciplinary action. Eventually, she was told by a teacher: 'you either leave or we suspend you', so she left.

In identifying the school environment as impacting on early school leaving we are not trying to blame schools or teachers for this phenomenon. However, what this theme does point to is the complexity of the school-teacher-student relationship, and the importance of positive relationships between students and teachers to connect young people to school. As Brown et al (2001) point out, this positive relationship involves 'mutual respect and responsibility' (p.6). Current policies that focus almost entirely on motivating students, or addressing their 'problem' behaviour, fail to take into account this complexity of interrelationships in their attempts to deal with early school leaving. There was also a feeling that teaching methods, the curriculum and indeed the education system are far too inflexible to be able to address the sorts of issues involved.

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The social environment of the school is another critical issue that impacted on the young women's decision to stay at school or leave early. There are two aspects of the impact of the school environment on the young women. The first relates to bullying, fighting, and a non-academic oriented social environment. This aspect helps drive young women out of school. The second relates to the importance of friendship to young women at this stage of life, and the ability of strong friendships to help keep young women at school for longer.

Both the young women and their mothers experienced bullying to some extent. Three of the at-school girls experienced bullying. Ruby, for example, talked about having to watch out for girls that don't like her and avoiding eye contact when she's at the shopping centre. Bullying was also experienced by three of the post-school participants, one of whom reports being regularly beaten up by other students. The cross-generational continuity in the experience of bullying was also evident, with three mothers talking about being bullied when they were in high school. According to Claire, her high school was 'a test of survival ... probably the scariest part of my life'. Louise noted that social

rejection and harassment from other students made it 'hard for you to want to go to school in the first place'. Two of the at-school participants reported being the bully, rather than being bullied. In one case Lillian, was involved in the verbal and physical harassment of another girl during the time of the fieldwork. The initial fight led to her being suspended from school.

Another negative aspect of the school social environment discussed by the participants relates to violence, and the use of violence to sort out problems between friends. The potential for violence at school (being beaten or beating someone up) was referred to by most of the at-school girls, and some of the girls had been disciplined by their school for getting into fights. Lillian talked about worrying about the 'bitchiness' that goes on at high school, fearing that 'someone could turn on me or something'.

The mothers also talked about these fights, and they noted that they are 'pretty big issues' (At-school mothers' focus group, p.3). In addition they discussed the cross-generational continuity of fighting between girls in high school. As one mother stated: 'And none of it is any different to my era so I don't know about you but it's exactly how the girls acted' (p.4). According to Claire, her school was in a rough area and had 'the worst reputation in the state'. Problems amongst students were settled by fights and never taken up with teachers or the principal. One mother went so far as to talk about this issue as being similar to animals marking their territory:

Well you've got 700 to 800 kids in one area and [for] there never to be a clash, totally impossible. Adults couldn't do it. They're marking their territory aren't they? They're basically standing their ground becoming who they are, so you can't change it by suspending them. (At-school mothers' focus group, p. 4)

In contrast to these negative social experiences is the experience of friendship at school. A central finding in this study was the importance of friendship to the young women. Nearly all of the young women identified their friendships as the most important thing in their lives. In fact, friends formed the dominant source of support for nearly all of the participants, including the mothers. There are both positive and negative aspects of friendships in terms of their impact on school retention. On the one hand, strong friendship bonds can encourage young women to stay at school in order to be with their friends. In fact, a number of the post-school and at-school girls only went to school because they wanted to be with their friends. Friends also function as a source of support in dealing with personal issues outside of the school environment, and in dealing with harassment within the school. Kirsty, for example, feels that the only thing she likes about school is being with her friends. This is echoed by Josie, who talked about being harassed by other students and her friends making school bearable for her. The post-school girls also identified their friendships as significant in keeping them at school. Friendship also provides the girls with a form of sub cultural capital, which allows them to reward each other. If they do certain things or behave in certain ways this is acknowledged through the approval of their friends and provides them with a means of generating self-respect.

There is a second aspect to friendships in relation to early school leaving, however, as friendships also have the ability to undermine the young women's investment in their education. This was evident in the interviews with both the young women and their mothers, and was generally related to the foregrounding of friendship over schooling in these young women's lives. Fighting with friends in particular appears to have an impact on schooling. As a result of the extremely high importance placed on friendships in the young women's lives, falling out with friends has the capacity to seriously distract them from their schoolwork. This was pointed out by Bronwyn, who talked about the impact of falling out with a close friend, stating: 'And I was probably distracted in class. It just all changes when you have a fight with a friend' (p. 3).

Peer pressure is another aspect of friendship that can work against school retention. Alice, for example, describes feeling that she has changed since starting high school, becoming very loud after being fairly quiet in primary school. She admits that this change may be because the friends she has in high school are themselves very loud. Participants also experienced a form of peer pressure that discouraged involvement in academic pursuits. Bronwyn expressed this particularly when she commented that while she wants to do well at school and have all her friends:

... it's not like that. You can either be a goodie-goodie and do all your work and have no friends, or you can be – not do work and be popular. That's how it is and you can't have any in-between. That's what I hate about this school. (p.5)

Peer pressure was also a facet of the school lives of the mothers. For example, Beverly, who left school at 15, identified herself as a good student until she became more interested in her social life than in studying. She started to skip school from the end of Year 9 and hung out at her friends' houses or went to town..

This discussion demonstrates a down-side of subcultural capital in that girls may reward each other for challenging school norms and for adopting attitudes and behaviours that get them into trouble. Further, if girls feel compelled to make a choice between school values and subcultural values they are likely to choose the latter. A difficulty for teachers in these circumstances is the paradox that the more they challenge such attitudes and behaviours the more they provide girls with opportunities to enhance their subcultural capital by intensifying their anti school behaviours.

Girls without friends appear to experience particular difficulty. They are often socially disconnected and personally withdrawn. Their marginalization and loneliness at school may go unnoticed by the teachers but it may also make them vulnerable to abuse by their peers and is likely to mean that school is intolerable for them. The lack of friends can also make life out of school a misery. One overall consequence can be depression, self-loathing and perhaps anger at the school or the family. Depression certainly makes it difficult for some girls and indeed their mothers to make the interpersonal connections that would help them to grapple with the other difficulties that they experience.

Sometimes friendship groups are seen as a problem by the school or alternatively they are romanticised without acknowledging their down-sides for the young women. Given their centrality in girls' lives, understanding the pull, power, perversity and diversity of school-girl friendships is important for all parties in the education process.

DESIRE / NEED TO WORK

The critical issues discussed above, namely not having basic needs met, negative aspects of the school environment and difficulties associated with the social environment, can be described as 'push' factors in that they function to push girls out of school (McMillan and Marks 2003). In contrast, the desire or need to work can be understood as a 'pull' factor in that it pulls them out of school and, hopefully, into work.

The desire or need to work was not a particularly big issue for at-school young women in this study. In fact, none of the at-school girls stated that the desire or need to get a job would drive them to leave school early. However, nearly all of the young women either already have a part-time job or would like to get one. The main reasons given for working, or wanting to work, are money and independence. As Lillian pointed out, working part-time while at school is an important step in her life, as she has to 'learn to be independent'. Financial independence and the opportunity to purchase desirable consumer goods is a strong motivator for work, as is the aspiration to be treated as an adult and with respect. Only a few of the post-school girls left school early for reasons of work. For example, after working during the summer holidays after completing Year 10 Courtney's employer offered her a job, which she felt was too good an opportunity to turn down. Lesley had a similar experience, and also felt the offer of a job was too good an opportunity to refuse. Families on low incomes are often reluctant to take the risk of refusing work opportunities and the incomes they afford.

The desire or need to work as a factor contributing to early school leaving was most evident in the interviews with the mothers. Many of the mothers were either offered full-time work while still at school, and took up the offer, or made the decision that they would prefer to be in the work force rather than at school so as to be independent and contribute to the family income. This reflects the discontinuities in the economic and policy context of the young women and their mothers. As discussed previously, the economic environment during the time when the mothers were leaving school was one in which the likelihood of them finding work was relatively high. This is not the case for the young women, who are leaving school early only to face the prospect of unemployment, or at best only part-time employment. Despite the mothers leaving school early for reasons of work and work opportunities, several have returned to study to improve their lives for their children. This reflects further differences in context for the young women and their mothers, as these mothers are only now able to go to school, TAFE or adult re-entry, options that were not previously available to them.

SUMMARY

In this study we have identified four critical issues impacting on the schooling experiences of the participating young women, namely the need to meet basic needs, the

impact of the school environment and the social environment at school on this decision, and the impact of the desire/need to work. We have also provided a unique cross-generational perspective of these experiences, discussing the continuities and discontinuities across the generations.

These critical issues do not necessarily in themselves determine whether the young women stay or leave school early; rather they interrelate with each other to make early school leaving more likely. For example, problems with teachers and fights at school could be a result of the young women having trouble at home. In one case, Anna, who is 15 and in Year 9, attributed her change from being quiet and shy to becoming a 'loudmouth' as a result of her regaining control of her life following counseling for suicidal tendencies. Friends can act as buffers against issues such as problems at home and bullying, and participants (both young women and their mothers) reported that friends, and not professional support agencies, were their primary source of support. However, friendships can also exacerbate difficulties at school by discouraging young women from studying and encouraging behaviour that can lead to problems with teachers.

While there is much cross-generational continuity in the critical issues relating to early school leaving, the major discontinuity lies in the context. Although mothers also often left school early, experienced disrupted family patterns and sometimes violence, and experienced similar school and social issues, the economic context of their early school leaving was different. This suggests that they were perhaps not as vulnerable as their daughters, who are even less likely to be employed.

Having discussed the critical issues impacting on the young women's decisions about leaving school early, in the following section we introduce some 'issues for consideration' based on this analysis.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

As discussed previously, this report forms an aspect of the findings of a broader study investigating the educational, labour market and social experiences of disadvantaged young women living in the urban/rural fringe. The broader ARC project arose out of a concern about the move away from a consideration of the educational experiences of young women, towards a focus on the experiences of young men. While there have been many positive changes for young women, we argue that issues remain regarding the educational experiences of disadvantaged young women, in this case young women living in the urban/rural fringe. One important issue for these young women is early school leaving, and the likelihood that they will be further disadvantaged by leaving school early. In this report we have focused on the issue of early school leaving for young women in the urban/rural fringe, and the decisions these young women make about staying at school or leaving early

In the previous section we discussed four critical issues impacting on decisions of young women about staying at school or leaving early. These are: the need to meet basic needs, the impact of the school environment and the social environment at school on this decision, and the impact of the desire/need to work. Rather than offering recommendations, in this section we offer issues for consideration by schools and services providers that are grounded in the themes identified by the young women themselves as impacting on their ability to stay at school.

We begin with a discussion of a range of issues for consideration for schools and service providers. The issues include those relating to the importance of friendships, the impact of mothers, the importance of meeting basic needs and the use of support services. No doubt these issues are not new to policy makers and service providers. However, what this study adds is a further dimension about generational patterns of disadvantage. This means that without intervention - including those that are already underway - these patterns may well be transmitted to future generations. In raising these issues we do not propose specific policies or practices to address school retention. Rather, we provide a series of questions for those who develop policies and programs to consider. We end with a discussion of alternative education pathways, and offer support for the continuation and extension of existing programs for the provision of alternative education pathways.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIPS

The first issue we would like to raise is the importance of *friendships* in these young women's lives. As discussed in the previous section, friendships are central to the experience of schooling and impact both positively and negatively on the decision to leave school early. While policies have been introduced to address some aspects of the school social environment, such as bullying, the positive and negative impact of friendships on young women has not been explicitly addressed. Yet, issues associated with connections and relationships are very important for young women. It is vital to connect the disconnected and also to harness girls' friendship and subcultural capital in ways that attach them positively to school and/or to furthering their education through other educational avenues.

Questions for consideration:

How might teachers learn more about the role of friendship in the lives of those girls at their school who are at risk of leaving early? What research approaches would assist them to do this?

How best might teachers, girls themselves and their mothers identify the benefits and costs of friendships and explore ways to minimise the costs and enhance the benefits. How might girls' friendships be harnessed so as to assist girls' learning, particularly in the middle school years?

How might the most constructive aspects of girls' subcultural capital be directed towards educational and beneficial social ends?

What are the best ways for schools, girls and mothers to deal with the damaging effects of breakdowns in friendships?

How might schools connect those girls who are isolated due to lack of friends at school?

How might young women who have left school early but have returned to their education in some manner become role models and mentors for girls at risk of leaving early?

THE IMPACT OF MOTHERS

The second issue we would like to raise is the *impact of mothers* on their daughters' decisions to stay at school or leave early. We consider it significant that while all of the mothers expressed a strong desire for their daughters to stay at school and highly valued their daughters' education, ultimately most placed the value of their daughters' happiness above that of them staying at school. This is understandable given some mothers' vivid memories of the pain of their own schooling. They therefore empathise strongly with any pain their daughters are experiencing. They do not necessarily trust the school to address the causes of their daughters' problems at school. If they think the daughter and the family will be happier they are prepared to agree to their daughter leaving school, and even laudable, the possible short-term nature of their happiness should the girls leave school early is an important consideration.

Questions for consideration:

How does the school staff view the girls' mothers? Do they have positive or negative views of them? Are they seen as deficient, as heading dysfunctional families, as inadequate educational role models for instance? If so, how can such negative stereotypes be altered?

How can mothers be encouraged to work jointly with the school in the interests of their daughters' education? What might this joint work involve?

Could a school-based mothers' support group be of assistance to schools and to other mothers and daughters?

How can schools become more approachable for these mothers?

How could schools better inform mothers (or mother surrogates) about current school policy and current broader policy directions?

Could mothers who were early leavers but have undertaken mature-age study be a resource to speak to school groups about their experiences?

How can schools build upon the strengths (and help address the some of the relevant difficulties) of mother-daughter relationships?

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEETING BASIC NEEDS

A third issue that needs to be considered when developing policies around early school leaving is the need for these girls to meet their *basic needs*, and to have their basic needs met. Safety, security, care, respect and trust are essential prerequisites for their learning. So too is an elemental level of happiness. The reported levels of violence and anger in these girls' lives were high. These experiences, and other areas in which their basic needs are not being met, highlight the importance for policy developers to view the girls' lives as a whole, rather than focusing only on what happens at school. These experiences are particularly significant given the negative impact of familial, psychological and social stress on well-being and school performance (Paradise, Rose, Sleeper et al. 1994; Livaditis, Zaphiriadis, Samakouri et al. 2003).

Mothers want schools to attend to their daughters' basic needs at school. Further, they want them to be attended to with compassion rather than judgment and for this to happen in such a way that they can maintain their pride and as much privacy as possible. They want the school to adjust and adapt to the issues that their daughters are grappling with. Indeed, given the importance that mothers and daughters place on happiness, it might be argued that this too is a basic need.

Questions for consideration:

How can teachers be made more aware of issues in the lives of girls 'at risk' without breaching confidentiality?

How can an atmosphere of trust be developed with those experiencing risk?

Can provisions such as 'time out' of school be provided for students experiencing stress at home?

How can teachers convey a sense of 'respect' to those students who may disrupt their classes due to troubled home lives or to the troubles they are having in the school and the social environment?

What is the best sort of support service that can be provided to help those experiencing anger and violence to deal with it?

How can mothers' experience of these issues be harnessed to assist schools?

How can schools address the problem of girls' unhappiness? What makes girls happy at school?

THE USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

The final issue we would like to raise is that of *support*. The provision of support services both within schools and in the community are considered to be important in addressing the issue of early school leaving, and other issues young people might be facing.

However, in general and notwithstanding the important work of key supportive individuals, in this study the participants reported issues and difficulties in approaching schools and service providers for help. Instead, friends and families were identified as the first line of contact. While mothers did at times draw on external support mechanisms, this was not the case for the young women, and the few that did draw on these mechanisms tended to only do so in extreme cases (such as mental illness and abuse).

Some participants had positive experiences of support agencies, however, at times when

agencies or schools were approached by a few of the participants, they reported negative experiences. For example, some students had found that teachers who they approached for support had betrayed their confidence, and were thus deemed to be untrustworthy. In other cases there appeared to be little or no knowledge of existence of agencies.

Questions for consideration:

Why is it that girls and their mothers do not avail themselves of support services as much as they might? What sorts of research would help to elicit information on this question and enhance understanding of the issues?

On the basis of what is learnt in answer to the previous question, how can the sources of support within schools (counselors, teachers) best strengthen the services that they offer to girls at risk of leaving school early and their mothers?

How might more resources be attracted to under resourced support services?

How might closer links be developed between schools and other local support services?

What is the best form these links might take?

Having briefly introduced some issues for schools and service providers to consider when addressing early school leaving, we now turn to a discussion of alternate educational pathways as one possible way of addressing this problem.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

Perhaps the most important consideration that has arisen from this study is the importance of the provision of a range of alternative educational pathways for young women who leave school early.

The notion of ‘pathways’ for the transition of young people from education to the work force or to further education and training plays an important role in current educational rhetoric along with notions of life-long learning and multiple career paths (McKenzie 2000; Carter 2001). The focus in schools tends to be on streaming young people along a general education or a vocational education or apprenticeship pathway and providing individuals with the skills and capacities to be successful in their chosen pathway.

Planning for a somewhat predictable future is emphasized. For example, *Futures Connect* (DECS 2002) is South Australia’s school retention and transition strategy, targeting 13 to 19 year-olds. It aims to provide students with access to the services and mentorship of various partners and with a set of tools for planning their future. These tools include:

- A learning pathways plan (LPP) that connects students’ learning with their strengths for their own personal growth and for planning their futures.
- A transition portfolio that engages each young person in deliberate reflection about his or her school and community activities, and includes a plan of action to achieve desired goals and aspirations.
- A transition pathways plan that describes each student’s pathway to further education, work and training.

Currently, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs are seen as an important alternate pathway from education to work for young people. According to Fullarton, the

‘introduction of VET subjects into the senior secondary school was seen as a means of providing real choice for those students not inclined towards academic studies, and to provide alternatives for those students at-risk of early school leaving’ (2001, p. 40). Programs also exist to maintain ‘at-risk’ young people’s attachment to school, such as the option of part-time schooling when they feel unable to cope with full-time study. These education programs provide useful options for young people at risk of early school leaving. However, they have certain limits with regard to the girls of this study.

One limit is the focus on progressing in a linear fashion from school to work or further study. Another is the focus on the school itself at the expense of other educational options. A third limitation is the futuristic orientation which some students are simply not able to adopt for a range of reasons. As we have indicated throughout this report, for some young women, staying at school is not an option at this point in their lives. Indeed, the pattern they are most likely to follow is not linear and may involve a range of configurations of movement between education, paid work, family work and unemployment. This means that policies such as *Futures Connect*, and alternative curriculum options, might not be of particular use or relevance to them. They may reenter education at different stages in their lives as have many of their mothers.

We recognise that there are consequences for these young women when they leave school early either through choice or necessity; however, the policy emphasis on retention and school success, while it undoubtedly helps many young people, may exacerbate these consequences by further marginalising and stigmatising those who don’t follow any of the current available pathways.

One way of addressing this problem is the provision of alternative education options that challenge the assumption of a linear pathway from education and / or training into the workforce and that allow for a more convoluted life course.

We acknowledge that some such alternative educational pathways are currently available to early school leavers, and argue that these need to continue and be further developed. One approach is adult re-entry into high school for those people who have left school early and who would like to complete their final year. For example, in South Australia there are a number of Specialist Centres for Adults that cater specifically for those people who have been away from secondary education for at least six months at the time of their enrolment. This alternate pathway provides a good opportunity for re-entry into school for early school leavers who, like many of our participants, feel they have no choice but to leave before completing their Year 12. In fact, many of our mothers and post-school young women were involved in adult re-entry programs. Given the findings presented in this report, we would argue for these pathways to be strengthened and made more available, particularly to young people who are implicitly discouraged from taking such routes except as a last resort. It is also important that young women be made aware of these alternatives and that they are encouraged to see them as legitimate alternatives not as choices of last resort. Indeed, wider acknowledgement and support of such options is important if those who pursue them are to see them as legitimate and valuable possible

choices at the appropriate stages of their lives. Educational re-entry should always be possible and encouraged.

Our study involved a number of young women and mothers who left school early and who nonetheless returned to their education. Some have thrived in the different environment and have brought more maturity and commitment to their studies than they were able to at school. For others the links they have made to their post school education are fragile. Indeed, often what has kept them going has been the human connections that have been made possible through the educational environment. In some such cases basic needs have remained an issue and these have included childcare, income, housing, health and self care. But with such young women their education has been factored into the mix more powerfully than when they were at school. Their education has mattered more to them.

This study also raises important questions around the notion of 'pathways through life'. It seems that there are 'respectable' linear pathways for young people, involving completion of school and / training followed by entry into the workforce. This is juxtaposed with the more fragmented life pathways for those young women, who leave school early, have a baby, work for a period of time, have another baby, go back to education, and re-enter the workforce. It is time for us to consider such non-linear pathways through life as having value both to the individual and to society, and to provide more services and options that cater to such a pathway.

APPENDIX 1

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, MEDIA REPORTS

Allard, A. (2005) 'Capitalizing on Bourdieu: How useful are concepts of 'social capital' and 'social field' for researching 'marginalised' young women?', *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 3, no.1.

Allard, A. (2004) 'Early school leaving and the classed and gendered assumptions of 'good student'/'good girl'/'good woman'. Published conference paper. Geelong, Deakin University. http://www.deakin.edu.au/education/quality_learning

Allard, A. and McLeod, J. (2004) 'At-risk' young women speak about their influences and experiences in making decisions about post-compulsory schooling'. *Selected conference proceedings of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Biennial Conference, Adelaide, September 2003*.

Allard, A. (2004) 'Working with Bourdieu: exploring an 'at-risk' young woman's narrative, using concepts of 'social capital' and 'social field'. Paper presented at the *Learning from the margins: inclusion/exclusion, and the educational and social experiences of at 'risk' young women* conference, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, July.

Bullen, E. and Kenway, J. (2005) 'Bourdieu, subcultural capital and risky girlhood', in *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 3, no.1.

Bullen, E. and Kenway, J. (2004) 'Sub cultural capital and the female underclass: A feminist response to an underclass discourse', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 141-153.

Kenway, J. (2005) 'Gender equity in education: The Australian experience', in L. Chisholm and J. September (eds) *Gender Equity in South African Education 1994-2004: Perspectives from Government, Research and Civil Society*, Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Kenway, J. and McLeod, J. (2004) 'Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and 'spaces of points of view': whose reflexivity, which perspective?', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 525-544.

Kenway, J. (2004) 'Inclusion's exclusions: gender, violence and girlhood'. Paper presented at the *Learning from the margins: inclusion/exclusion, and the educational and social experiences of at 'risk' young women* conference, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, July.

Kenway, J. (2003) Forward to Ostler, A. and Vincent, K. *Rethinking Inclusion, putting girls back on the agenda*, Routledge.

Mackinnon, A. and Bullen, E. (2005) 'Out on the borderlands': Time, generation and personal agency in women's lives, *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 3, no.1.

McLeod, J. (2005) 'Feminists re-reading Bourdieu: Old debates and new questions about gender habitus and gender change', *Theory and Research in Education*, vol.3, no.1, pp.11-30.

McLeod, J. (2005) 'Reproducing Gender?', *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, vol. 26, no. 2.

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Which Girls, Which Boys? Gender, Feminism and Educational Reform' in J. Allen (ed) *Sociology of Education: Possibilities and Practices*, Revised 3rd edition, Katoomba (NSW): Social Sciences Press, pp.165-196.

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Neo-liberal agendas and gender equity: from social justice to individual performance', *Redress: Journal of the Association of Women Educators*, vol. 13, no.3.

McLeod, J. (2005) 'Introduction to symposium', *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 3, no.1, pp. 1-4.

McLeod, J. and Wright, K. (2004) 'Talk as prophylactic and cure: strategies for negotiating life on the margins of education and work'. Paper presented at the *Annual Conference of The Australian Sociology Association*, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia, Dec. 8-11.

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Cross-generational methodologies for researching young women 'living on the margins': questions about subjectivity, repetition and longing for a better life', paper presented at the *Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education*, University of Melbourne, Australia, Nov 29-Dec 2.

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Feminism, social justice, and longing for a better life: towards a sociology of hope', paper presented at *Learning from the margins: inclusion/exclusion and the educational and social experiences of 'at risk' young women*, Deakin University, Toorak, Australia, July 12-13.

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Accounting for gender with Bourdieu — feminist interrogations of habitus, social field and identity', paper presented at *In dialogue with Bourdieu-questions for and from feminism and education*, American Educational Research Association, annual meeting, San Diego, April 12-16th.

Invited seminars and key note addresses

Kenway, J. (2004) *Researching Youth Now: Some confronting issues*, Invited address and workshop for youth researchers, University of Otago, NZ, Nov.

Kenway, J. (2004) *Gender equity in education: The Australian experience*, Opening session on *New Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches*, at the *Gender Equity in Education: Government, Research and Civil Society Conference*, OXFAM. Capetown, May.

Kenway, J. (2004) *Gender Reform in Schools: Slip Sliding Away*, Keynote address, National Women's Conference, Australian Teachers' Union, Melbourne, Sept.

Kenway, J. (2004) *Gender and Trouble: Bad boys and naughty girls*, Keynote address, National Middle School Conference, Dept of Education and Children's Services, SA, July/Aug.

Kenway, J. (2004) *Examining gender dynamics through engaging educational narratives*, Workshop, National Middle School Conference, Dept of Education and Children's Services, SA, July/Aug.

Mackinnon, A. (2005) The Clare Burton Memorial Lectures (presented at six venues across Australia in October)

Mackinnon, A (2004) 'Refusing what is anyway refused': girls making 'choices' in times of constraint', Inaugural Jean Blackburn Memorial Lecture, The Australian Education Union with the Hawke Research Institute, SA, November.

McLeod, J. (2004) ' Reframing gender equity to consider the experiences and 'pathways' of 'at risk' young women', Opening panel, Conference of the Australian Women, Educators, Melbourne, September.

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Psychotherapeutic themes in everyday talk—cross-generational perspectives on school family and futures', invited seminar School of Education and Social Welfare, Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, Oct. 15th

McLeod, J. (2004) 'Psychotherapeutic themes in everyday talk—cross-generational perspectives on school family and futures', invited seminar Families and Social Capital Research Group, London South Bank University, October 13th.

McLeod, J. (2004), 'Theoretical claims and empirical takes in researching social and biographical change' Invited opening presentation, to symposium on 'Researching change and continuity: qualitative perspectives', London South Bank University, Funded by the ESRC Families and Social Capital Research Group, October. 14th

Conference organization

McLeod, Julie and Allard, Andrea [convenors] (2004) ' Learning from the margins; inclusion/exclusion and the educational and social experiences of disadvantaged young women', International Research conference held at Deakin University, Toorak Campus, July 12-13, funding from Deakin University Quality Learning Research Priority Area

Media Commentary

October: Article in UniSA UniNews

October 13 *Advertiser* article by Laura Anderson

Life Matters (Radio national) - live interview with Julie McCrossen (AM)

National news – item Adelaide 2pm news bulletin. Quote by AM

Radio SBS – interview (AM)

October 14

Radio Adelaide (FM) – interview Anna Day (AM)

Adelaide radio 891 – Evening programme with Peter Goers (sp?) – live interview AM.

December 2004

Article in *Teacher* December 2004, 'Girls on the margin' (written by Geraldine Hinter) describing project and early findings

REFERENCES

- ABS (1998). South Australia's young people, 1996. National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- ABS (1998). Victoria's young people, 1996. National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Audirac, I. (1999). Unsettled views about the fringe: Rural-urban or urban-rural frontiers. Contested countryside: The rural urban fringe in North America. O. J. Furuseth and M. B. Lapping. Vermont, Aldershot, Hants and Brookfield: 7-32.
- Australian Government (2000). Australian Commonwealth Inquiry into Education of Boys. <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/eewr/htm>.
- Bjeren, G. and I. Elgqvist-Saltzman (1994). Gender and education in a life perspective: Lessons from Scandinavia. Avebury, Aldershot.
- Blackmore, J., J. Angwin, G. Shacklock and P. Hodder (2003). Why stay on at school? Two stories of student attitudes to school in a rural and a suburban community. International Education Research Conference AARE-NZARE, 7 March 2003, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Bullen, E. and J. Kenway (2004). "Subcultural capital and the female 'underclass'? A feminist response to an underclass discourse." Journal of Youth Studies 7(2): 141-153.
- Carter, J. (2001). Understanding youth pathways: Paths through the maze; route maps for education, community and health services. ACER Research Conference, 14-16 October 2001, Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Collins, C., J. Kenway and J. McLeod (2000). Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and in their initial destinations after leaving school. Canberra, Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth.
- Department of Education and Children's Services (1996). School Discipline. Adelaide, DECS.
http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/policy/files/links/School_Discipline_policy.pdf. Accessed 20/05/04
- Department of Education and Children's Services (2001). Foundations for the Future. Adelaide, DECS.
http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/policy/files/links/Foundation_for_the_Future.pdf. Accessed 24/05/04
- Department of Education and Children's Services (2002). Futures Connect. Adelaide, DECS.
http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/docs/files/communities/docman/1/FuturesConnectStrateg_Broc.pdf. Accessed 20/05/04
- Department of Education and Children's Services (2003). Attendance Improvement Package. Adelaide, DECS.
http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/speced2/files/links/attend_section1_4.pdf. Accessed 20/05/04
- Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2004). How young people are faring: Key indicators 2004. An update about the learning and work situation of young Australians. New South Wales, Australia, Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

- Edwards, J. (2005). Policing and practising subjectivities: Poor and working class young women and girls and Australian government mutual obligation policies. School of Education. Adelaide, University of South Australia. **PhD**.
- Epstein, D., J. Elwood, V. Hey and J. Maw, Eds. (1998). Failing boys? Issues in gender and achievement. Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Fullarton, S. (2001). Does VET in schools make a difference to post-school pathways? ACER Research Conference. Understanding youth pathways: What does research tell us? 14-16 October 2001, Melbourne, ACER.
- Government of South Australia (2004). Making the connections. Social Inclusion Unit, Department of the Premier and Cabinet.
- Harrison, L. (2000). Representing sexual hegemony: Focus groups and governmentality. Researching Youth. J. McLeod and K. Malone. Hobart, Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.
- Krueger, R. A. and M. A. Casey (2000). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. Thousand Oaks CA, Sage.
- Lamb, S., P. Dwyer and J. Wyn (2000). Non-completion of school in Australia: The changing patterns of participation and outcomes. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth. Victoria, Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Livaditis, M., K. Zaphiriadis, M. Samakouri, C. Tellidou, C. Tzavaras and K. Xenitidis (2003). "Gender differences, family and psychological factors affecting school performance in Greek secondary school students." Educational Psychology **23**(2): 223-231.
- Mackinnon, A., I. Elgqvist-Saltzman and A. Prentice, Eds. (1998). Education into the 21st century: Dangerous terrain for women? London, Falmer Press.
- Marks, G. and J. McMillan (2001). Early school leavers: Who are they, why do they leave, and what are the consequences. Understanding Youth Pathways Research Conference, 15-16 October 2001, Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research.
- McKenzie, P. (2000). Youth pathways to promote lifelong learning. CEET Conference on Mobilising Resources for Lifelong Learning, 30 October 2000, Melbourne, Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET).
- McMillan, J. and G. N. Marks (2003). School leavers in Australia: Profiles and pathways. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth. Victoria, Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Mendes, P. (2003). Australian Welfare Wars: The players, the politics and the ideologies. Sydney, UNSW Press.
- Paradise, J., K. Rose, L. Sleeper and M. Nathanson (1994). "Behaviour, family function, school performance, and predictors of persistent disturbance in sexually abused children." Pediatrics **93**(2): 452-459.
- Steedman, C. (1986). Landscape for a good woman: A story of two lives. London, Virago.
- Wood, S. (2000). "Participatory action research: An empowering methodology framework with marginalised young people." Scottish Youth Issues Journal **1**(1): 63-85.