Sweet 16: life chances and school to work transitions

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Introduction

The transition from school to further training and employment is generally seen as a crucial aspect of the life course, but one that can differ across different socio-economic groups. The Brotherhood of St Laurence’s longitudinal study, the Life Chances Study, provides data to explore the experiences of a diverse group of Australian-born young people. The study commenced in 1990 with 167 children born in that year. By the end of 2006 some of the participants, now 16 year olds, were making crucial decisions about their futures.

The paper draws on both the longitudinal data and the new data of stage 8 of the study to explore:

- What are the differences in school engagement and family life for the 16 year olds who have grown up in low-income families and those in higher income families?
- What are the links to the workforce for those who have left school early and those still at school?
- What is the history and current situation of the 16 year olds who have already left school?

Implications of the findings for policy and practice are raised.

Youth transitions

Young people in Australia are of course growing up in the context of an ever changing world, changes are social, economic, technological and environmental. The concept of young people achieving independence in a simple transition from school to work is no longer widely applicable. For example, full-time jobs for teenagers have declined by 14,000 since 1995 (Dusseldorp 2006, p. ix). Young people now combine both study and work in various ways. Part-time work has become a normal part of life for many secondary students (Smith & Green 2001). The majority completing Year 12 have had part-time jobs and the full-time student is likely to be a part-time worker for many years.

The question is raised of whether the current transition into adulthood involves an extended youth as young people study longer, or whether they are entering adulthood younger having to balance the responsibilities of work, education and the rest of their life.

Table 1 shows the range of education and employment activities of 15 to 19 year olds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15-19 year olds</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full time education only</td>
<td>41.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>full time education plus employment</td>
<td>28.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total in full time education</td>
<td>69.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>full time employment only</td>
<td>10.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>full time employment plus part time study</td>
<td>5.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total in full time work</td>
<td>15.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part time employment and/or part time study</td>
<td>7.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not in education or employment</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total not in full-time work or study</td>
<td>15.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.1 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(from ABS in AIHW 2007, p 123)

The 15 per cent not in full-time work or study are generally seen as those ‘at risk’ – these include those in only part-time work, unemployed or not in the labour force (some will be travelling, some doing voluntary work, some will be carers, raising children).
**Life Chances Study**

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in 1990 in inner Melbourne. The study started as a population study of all children born in two inner suburbs with very diverse populations including high and low income groups and a range of ethnic backgrounds. It is a relatively small study compared to the new Growing Up in Australia longitudinal study or ACER Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth but it has the advantage of qualitative data and allows us to follow individuals over time.

The study commenced with 167 children and has followed them and their families over the years as they moved away from the inner suburbs. There was a major follow up when the children were 11 and 12. The findings are reported in Eleven plus (Taylor & Fraser 2003). At that time we found a strong persistence of low income: of the children who had been born into families on low incomes, three quarters were still in families on low incomes as 11 and 12 year olds.

The low-income families have a high proportion of sole parents, parents with limited formal education, limited English skills, unemployment, health problems and large numbers of children. These characteristics, particularly in combination, make it difficult to move out of low income.

For stage 7 at the end of 2005 we taped interviews with 41 selected 15 year olds and also interviewed their parents. These included all (33) those who had grown up on persistent low incomes (and eight on high incomes), to explore their engagement with school at this stage. The report of this stage on school engagement is on our website (Taylor & Nelms 2006).

Stage 8 was undertaken at the end of last year when the young people had turned 16. We did a mail out survey of parents and young people with a phone follow up – and had responses from 125 young people. We have recently followed up the early school leavers by phone to document their pathways. We are completing analysis of this data at present and the report will be available shortly (Taylor & Nelms forthcoming).

**School engagement at 16**

Young people's engagement with school can be an important factor in their resilience in their current lives as well as a key influence on their futures. The qualitative data from stage 7 (Taylor & Nelms 2006) helped explore the processes of school engagement.

Stage 8 allowed us to look at school engagement across 125 young people. We asked a number of questions relating to school, most of which had also been asked at 11 and 12. We found the 16 year olds less engaged with school than they were as 11 and 12 year olds (Table 2), but with a lot of diversity in this. For example: the number of 16 year olds who always or often looked forward to school was 37 per cent at age 16 but had been almost half (48 per cent) five years earlier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 School engagement factors by age (n=125)</th>
<th>age 11/12</th>
<th>age 16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always or often ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a good group of friends at school</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy learning new things</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get on well with my teachers*</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do my homework on time*</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look forward to going to school</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel left out at school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wag school</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight with other kids</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: NA = not applicable. These questions were not asked at stage 6.

*P<0.05 using McNemar test of significance.
We created a school engagement score from the eight items, and divided this into three categories high, medium and low.

The young people from low-income and from medium-income families were much less engaged than those from high-income families (Table 3). While 42 per cent of high-income 16 year olds had a high engagement score, only 18 per cent of those in low income families did so. These findings, disappointingly, are in line with those of previous studies. One always hopes the inequalities may lessen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School engagement score</th>
<th>Low income (n=39)</th>
<th>Medium income (n=31)</th>
<th>High income (n=55)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School engagement was clearly associated with a range of other factors in addition to family income. Our initial analysis shows high engagement was also associated with high self-rated academic performance and with positive family relationships. Low school engagement was associated with low well-being; more risk behaviours (smoking, drinking, drugs, trouble with police); parents having less than Year 12 education; sole parent families; and negative family relationships.

The findings illustrate some of the challenges for promoting school engagement.

**Engagement in work at 16**

Engagement in paid work while still at school provides a means for young people to prepare them for working life by exposing them to different types of work and working modes and types of work they may or may not want to engage in following school (Billett 2006).

Around 42 per cent of the Life Chances young people (or 50 young people) of those still at school were currently working. None of the five early school leavers were in paid work at stage 8 although two had had some work previously. Work for Life Chances participants is therefore mostly an activity of those still at school.

As would be expected none were working full time but there was a wide range of hours worked from one hour a week to one young person who was working up to 30 hours a week. Of those that were currently working, 62 per cent were working less than 10 hours, while 38 per cent were working 10 hours or more.

The young people were working in a wide range of jobs. Many were working in retail jobs (such in a shop or supermarket), and in hospitality (such as a waiter or kitchen hand). Other jobs included deliveries, babysitting, or working in their parent’s business.

On the whole, those working ‘mostly’ enjoyed their work (70 per cent compared with 14 per cent who ‘seldom’ enjoyed their work).

**Factors affecting engagement with work**

Those from low-income families were least likely to be working (31 per cent) in contrast to 52 per cent of medium-income and 44 per cent of high-income young people.
However where low-income young people were working, they were working longer hours. Two-thirds of working low-income young people were working 10 hours or over, compared with a third or under of the medium and high-income young people. This may contribute to the fact that low-income young people were less likely to ‘mostly enjoy’ their work.

Those young people working were somewhat more likely to feel they ‘always’ had enough money for what they needed (47 per cent compared to 36 per cent of those not working) and somewhat less likely to feel that their parents ‘always’ worried about money. However the fact that young people from medium and high-income families were more likely to be working, is likely to have had some bearing on this.

Factors other than income included gender, family background and self-rated academic achievement. Gender was found to be significantly associated with the likelihood of working: nearly half of girls were working compared with 30 per cent of boys.

Having both parents born in Australia or in an English-speaking country also had an impact on the likelihood of working, with around half of all those young people working in comparison with a quarter of those with both parents born in a non-English speaking country.

The young person’s family type (for example in sole parent family) did not have a strong impact on their likelihood of working. However young people with at least one parent working were twice as likely to be working themselves as opposed to those without a working parent (44 per cent compared with 21 per cent).

Proportionately more of the young people with ‘not high’ well-being were working (51 per cent compared with 38 per cent of those with a high well-being score).

There was a significant association between the young person having low self-rated academic performance scores and engaging in paid work. Low school achievers were most likely to be working: 61 per cent of low school achievers compared with less than 40 per cent of medium and high achievers. Only one of the working high achievers was working 10 hours or over compared with nearly half of the medium and low achievers. From the data available it is not clear whether those with lower academic performance are those that seek work or whether engaging in work has an impact on school performance.

A hypothesis that young people engaged in work would be more likely to be engaged in other parts of their life is not borne out, given that those family relationships, school engagement and risk behaviour scores were not strongly associated with working or not working. Further those working were less likely to have high well-being or to rate themselves high academic performers.

The 16 year olds who have already left school

Five of the 125 young people who participated in stage 8 had already left school. Five is a small number, but they are an important five because if we want to provide services or promote policies that assist the participation of young people who are early school leavers they illustrate some of the diversity of issues that need to be addressed.

Two clear findings for the five early school leavers at age 16 were that they all rated low on the school engagement score and that none of them were in paid work.

Their characteristics reflect the larger studies, for example boys, low academic achievers and those from low socioeconomic status families are more likely to be early school leavers (Penman 2004; Fullarton 2002) but they also highlight the diversity, and for some, the depth and layering of disadvantage.
The study is also examining their early indicators of disadvantage, for example reading at age 6 and teacher assessment at age 11. These will be explored in the final report (Taylor & Nelms forthcoming).

The interviews with the young people give a rich picture of their experiences. We will conclude by presenting in some detail one boy’s experiences of leaving school. Jack (a pseudonym) grew up in a low-income sole parent family on the metropolitan fringe.

What was the main reason you left school?
Well the main reason … there were a number of contributing factors. I guess it was partly to do with my own laziness, but a bit of harassment at school from my teachers, principal. And yeah, he was just hassling me, giving me a hard time, pulling me out of class for unknown reasons.

What have you done since you first left school?
Basically, sat around for a couple of weeks, maybe even a month. And got a job putting together computers for about a month and a half … when I got hired for the interview, he said it will be a bit hands on, but a lot of it will just be you know, doing filing and answering phones. So I took it as an administration job but he was making me work downstairs doing all this computer building and I was working with much older people who had experience and they were getting paid much, much more than I was and he was just paying me for the administration wage. So that was a bit jibbing and I didn’t quite like that. So it was within the trial period, so I just left. But it wasn’t a very good idea, cos I should have followed the rule where you get another job before you leave your current one. And I didn’t, so I haven’t been employed since.

And was that close to where you live?
No that was another factor of me leaving the job, you see. I accepted the job but it was in a big industrial area, just out in the middle of nowhere … I’d have to get up at 6, the job would start at 9. I’d get up at 6, catch a 6.30 train … but then I’d have to get a bus into the industrial estate of where I’d work. And from once I’d get there, I’d have to walk another five minutes to where I’d work in the middle of just bush and industrial sort of buildings and stuff. And then I’d have to sit out the front because I’d get there at about 8 and I’d have to sit there about an hour … Because they didn’t trust me enough to give me keys to get in there. So I’d just have to sit out in the cold and wait for them to rock up … There was only one bus that ran through there once a day, twice a day. One in there and one on the way back in the afternoon … the last one would be at 4.30 or something … I knocked off at 5 so the only way I could really get to any train station to get myself home was to scab a lift or walk through the bush at night and that was a bit creepy.

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

And did you find this any use, looking back?
They didn’t help very much, it didn’t work, and then once you got into job seeking part, unless you had someone sitting next to you giving you full advice, there weren’t very many places they would give you to look for.

What are you doing now?
Just waiting until next week and then enrolling myself into a TAFE course … a 6 month computer certificate course.

Jack had tried to enrol in the TAFE course the previous semester but was unsuccessful as his mother explained:
And there were two days the TAFE said to get enrolled … So he got there on the second day of enrolment and they said ‘no sorry you should have been here yesterday’, when it had been advertised and we’d looked on the net and everything like that, for two days of enrolment. So the second day he got there they said ‘no the class is full’ … . So that was a real bummer, so he’s spent the last four months hanging around … he tried to get volunteer work … And he’s tried for a few jobs and because he was only 16 … and no experience in anything, he just gave up. And he’s waiting, and … starting again, trying to be enrolled.

Jack’s account highlights a range of issues for early school leavers: lack of support from school staff; parents’ help in finding jobs; problems of youth wages; lack of trust of young workers; location of employment and accessibility by public transport for young people; the futility of the ‘make work’ aspect of ‘job search’ activities; the importance of individual help; and assistance in enrolling in TAFE.

We plan to follow the young people in the Life Chances Study over the next years and learn from their pathways.

Implications of the findings for policy and practice

Promoting school engagement

From the our study and from the wider literature on school engagement we highlight the following as some of the key issues in promoting school engagement:

- addressing diversity – of ethnicity and of ability – and providing a climate of inclusion
- listening to students
- containing the costs of education – how to deal with extra costs of activities, equipment and fees so as not to exclude students on low incomes
- avoiding the cycle of disengagement.

Assistance for those who have left school

A diversity of programs exist to assist early school leavers, for example Commonwealth funded programs including JPET (Jobs Placement, Employment and Training), and Youth Pathways (funded by DEST) for 13 to 19 year olds. However the situation of the early school leavers in our study highlights some of the gaps.

Policy issues of particular relevance for 16 years olds such as those in our study include:

- non-academic career options and flexible pathways back into education and training for those who have left
- affordable post-compulsory education, including school, TAFE and university
- the importance of individual support and advice for young people who have left school.

In conclusion, to facilitate young people make their multi-faceted transitions to adulthood it is important both to promote school engagement for those who stay and to provide timely and individual assistance for early school leavers.
Acknowledgements

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