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ABSTRACT

The experiences of early school leavers in a New South Wales Central Coast community during the year after they left school were examined to identify ways of easing their transition into the community and the work force. Data were collected through interviews with community service providers, representatives of educational agencies, refuge workers, and local employers. Few schools had a system for providing early school leavers with information about their options. Unlike in Europe, the responsibility of schools to early leavers in the North Coast appeared to be minimal and did not embrace the idea that early school leavers should be followed up via some well-established community-based arrangements. Because many early leavers left school too suddenly for the school to intervene or left "under a cloud," they were unlikely to receive sympathetic farewells and relevant information, even though they are the students most in need of information and support. It was concluded that the reason early school leavers pose such a problem for policy is because Australia's vocational education and training system remains based on the historical dominance of the apprenticeship system. Greater integration of education and training arrangements with the local community and its employer networks and support services was recommended. (Contains 32 references.) (MN)

Early school leavers in the community

John McIntyre & Bernice Melville

UTS Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training

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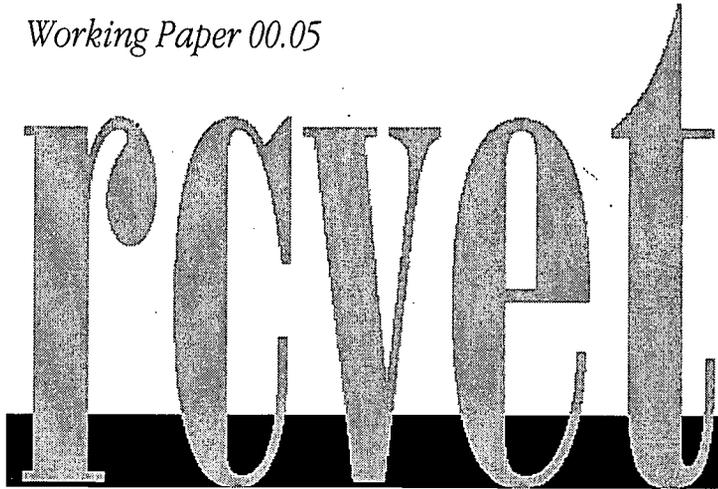
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Abstract

Vocational Education and Training (VET) should provide a vital community link between school and work but for many early school leavers this is not the case. When young people do not experience such links, any disadvantage from leaving school early can be all too easily exacerbated. In research focused on early school leavers in a NSW Central Coast community our approach was to generate a multi-perspective understanding of the school-to-work transitions of these young people. Vignettes were developed of the experiences of the early school leavers as they made their individual ways into the community in the year after leaving school. Using the work of Dwyer and associates on 'types of leavers' and 'patterns of transition' a typology was developed to gain a clearer perspective on these experiences. Perspectives were also sought through interviews with community service providers, educational agencies, refuge workers and other professionals, as well as from local businesses and employers. The resulting profile of early school leavers in a community is the complex context in which VET provision operates. The study concludes with a set of recommendations that spell out what might be done to bring together the options for young people in a coherent way.

INTRODUCTION

Early school leaving is currently portrayed as a negative outcome of schooling by contemporary educational policy that has attempted, generally unsuccessfully (Curtain & Sweet 1998), to maximise the proportion of youth staying to complete Year 12. Early school leaving is a problem of policy directed at channelling young people into appropriate life positions, with those who leave at year 10 positioned as the new educational deviants.

We argue that it is youth policy that is 'at risk' of misunderstanding young people and their participation in schooling and VET, by failing to grasp the diversity of circumstances and reasons for early school leaving. The current emphasis on Year 12 school retention draws attention away from larger questions around what is needed to support transition to adult life. There is a need to focus on the community context of youth policy, particularly on ways to overcome the fragmentation of services for young people who are 'at risk'. The research findings reinforce the most enlightened of recent policy thinking that asserts that the key is the planning and integration of services among agencies at the local level (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2000).

Nationally-funded research (see McIntyre, Melville, Schwenke & Freeland 1999 for further information) on early school leavers showed that the main problem is the 'cracked mosaic' of services that fails young people. However, not all early leavers need such support, since early leaving can be a positive experience and an expression of 'transition'. Therefore we focus on the circumstances under which early leaving becomes problematic for young people. Drawing on the analysis of 40 interviews conducted with early leavers on the NSW Central Coast, this paper summarises the way their diverse circumstances led to a new model, based on the work of Dwyer, for the classification of early leavers. The key assumption of the paper is that early leaving takes place in a local context in which both schooling and socio-economic circumstances are key factors. Reasons for early leaving are as diverse as the post-school experiences of young people concerned. This diversity reflects the social and economic character of the community, the youth labour market, transport, housing and further education opportunities and the young adult's own temperament, abilities, motivations and goals. There is a need for policy which identifies and targets those who leave early for negative reasons and those who lack the options and/or wherewithal to define and exercise their life choices. Appropriate community-based planning that integrates social security and education and training is crucial to meeting the needs of this 'at risk' group.

THE LITERATURE ON EARLY LEAVERS

Contemporary social policy tends to locate young people in a world that presents as many threats as it offers opportunities, particularly in relation to employment. Any review of the literature on young people 'at risk' reflects the attempts of social policy to grapple with the 'problem' of youth transition. The literature has many themes encompassing a broad range of theoretical, historical and social issues. These include the concept of early school leavers 'at risk'; who leaves school early and why; characteristics of early school leavers; services provided at the point of leaving school; models of intervention; experiences and outcomes of early school leavers; the labour market and young people; employment entry; employer perspectives; training and apprenticeships; employment patterns of early school leavers and the relationship between early school leaving and social disadvantage.

While it is not possible in this paper to cover all these issues the most pertinent will be discussed (see McIntyre, Melville, Schwenke & Freeland 1999 for further information). First, there is *the concept of early school leavers'at risk'*. The term 'at risk' has taken on something of a 'buzz word' quality with a multiplicity of uses tending to blur the concept. For our study we use the work of Batten & Russell (1995), and Dwyer, Wilson, Wyn & Stewart (1990) to develop a working definition of 'at risk' as being that of 'young people not making a successful transition from school into adult life through work and study'.

Second, there is the question of *who leaves school early and why they do so*. The diversity of circumstances of early leaving has led researchers (Dwyer et al, 1990 and Dwyer & the YRC 1996) to develop typologies of early school leavers. The groups classified include those who 'make a positive choice' to take up an alternative career path and who may need some placement assistance. These are less likely to be 'at risk' than 'opportune' leavers who take the opportunity to leave school when an alternative arises. In the short term those in the opportune group tend not to need assistance but in the medium and longer term may need referral assistance on a second-chance basis. Other groups are 'would be leavers' who

continue at school but who would prefer to leave, and 'circumstantial leavers' who are forced out of school for reasons other than educational such as through family circumstances. This group may benefit from flexible attendance patterns that make way for the student to take a part-time job. The remaining groups are 'discouraged leavers' who are discouraged by their educational experience and may need a supportive second-chance opportunity, and 'alienated leavers' for whom positive post-school experiences are crucial.

Third, researchers have tried to describe *the characteristics of early school leavers*. Lower achievers in relation to numeracy and literacy skills have a higher risk of leaving school early—less than 50% of boys with poor literacy skills complete secondary school. While girls generally are more likely to complete school, those with weak numeracy skills are more 'at risk' of early leaving than those with weak literacy skills. Although the likelihood of completing year 12 can be affected by parents' socio-economic status, higher numbers of students (more females than males) with fathers of lower socio-economic backgrounds were reported as completing school by Lamb (1997) and Lamb, Polesel & Teese (1995). Walker (in White 1993) discusses the effect of youth culture pressure in relation to academic performance. Hammer (1997) argues that although data on Norwegian youth show that, as in other countries, low levels of education give rise to the risk of unemployment, that it may be labour market structures rather than low educational levels that lead to a higher risk of recurrent unemployment. However he suggests that adjustment to school may be an even better measure of avoiding unemployment. Not dropping out of school in spite of difficulties may be related to personality factors required for enduring in and adjusting to steady employment.

The pattern of moving in and out of jobs and study is characteristic of, but not unique to, early school leavers. While the pattern of school retention rates has changed in the last decade, the labour market for young people has also changed sharply (Sweet 1995). Full-time work with one employer now seems to be the exception rather than the rule and as a result young people are finding themselves marginalised from mainstream employment, education and training.

TYPES OF EARLY LEAVERS

If the problem for research and policy is to acknowledge the diversity of the circumstances of 'early leaving', then a key to the problem is how the diversity can be classified. The analysis presented here reflects the empirical study of forty 1996 NSW Central Coast Year 10 school leavers from government schools. The study builds on the innovative work of Dwyer and others who identified that the realities of work and study for many young people are more complex than the 'linear models' of youth transition assumed by policy makers (Dwyer et al 1996, 1997b). The early leavers were interviewed and 'life themes' identified from the narratives. The themes were used to classify the leavers using the following typologies. Whether a leaver is 'at risk' of failing to make a transition to adult roles was assessed taking into account both the *type* of leaver (by circumstances) and the *pattern of transition* that seemed to be indicated. Our analysis joins the two typologies:

- *six types of leavers*: positive, opportune, would-be, circumstantial, discouraged and alienated. (Dwyer et al 1996, 12)

- *five patterns of transition: VOCAM—Vocational, Occupational, Context, Altered and Mixed (Dwyer et al 1997a, 5).*

By using both classifications it is possible to capture 'the diversity of experience associated with early leaving'. The leaver typology draws attention to the circumstances of leaving, while the VOCAM typology describes the patterns of youth in transition to adulthood (Dwyer et al 1997a, 5). Dwyer's 'would-be leavers' were excluded since these are 'reluctant stayers' rather than leavers.

Table 1. Classifications of early leavers based on Dwyer (1996, 1997a)

	Definition	Incidence
<i>Types of leavers:</i>		
Positive	leave school to follow a career choice or take up a job in a preferred area of work	19
Opportune	take an opportunity to leave school on finding a job or establishing a personal relationship	4
Would-be	stay reluctantly at school for lack of opportunity to leave	na
Circumstantial	those forced out of school for largely non-educational reasons such as needs for income	6
Discouraged	those who leave because of lack of success in schooling and whose level of performance and interest is low	8
Alienated	similar to the discouraged leavers, but likely to be identified as behaviour problems, be suspended or expelled	4
<i>Patterns of transition:</i>		
Vocational focus	leaver focused on gaining qualifications to enable a career	18
Occupational focus	give priority to work, subordinating other life choices	13
Context focus	emphasise the 'life-context chosen (eg family, lifestyle)	3
Altered patterns	reconsider their original route and change their goals	1
Mixed patterns	place equal value on a range of activities or goals	5

The leaver stories (McIntyre et al 1999) divide into two broad groups of leavers. There are those who leave because they are highly focused either on pursuing a vocational interest or in getting work and who are mostly clear about the transition they want to make and set about making it. However, there are other leavers who are not 'positive and focused' and who generally have found school a negative experience and wish to 'escape' to a different life. For these it is hard to find a motive and meaning other than this desire to be free of compulsory schooling. They are most likely to be 'at risk' because they are least likely to find employment or further education or training to allow them to make a successful transition to adult life. The typologies help to bring the variations in these groups into sharper focus.

In applying these typologies, we treated any leaver who is pursuing a definite vocational goal or interest as having a 'vocational' focus whether they are currently studying for appropriate qualifications or not. While some are very focused on their career path and left

to take up options other than further schooling, others left school in negative circumstances. The 'focused leavers' often prepared themselves well ahead of the actual point of departure from school. For others, leaving is more a reaction to negative school experiences, triggered by treatment meted out by the school or an event such as a job offer. Among the latter are those who leave without goals for post-school life and who are 'at risk' of failing to make a successful transition to active adult roles.

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AS A POSITIVE OUTCOME

In the main the positive leavers left school to follow a career choice or take up a job offer. The dominant pattern among these leavers is a 'vocational' focus. 'Vocational positives' are determined about pursuing their chosen careers and career goals. It was striking how some of these young people have organised their lives around achieving their vocational goals. Part-time work and relevant work experience are crucial in their career moves. Some worked voluntarily in order to gain an apprenticeship. A combination of work and study is important to most of these leavers. Some have made up their minds about a vocation long before school begins to offer career advice or suggest vocational options. Their goals crystallise, they start organising in earnest well before the time of leaving, and they leave to implement a career decision. While some fall on their feet, finding full-time work in a regular part-time job or going straight into the family business, others have to overcome obstacles which often includes initial failure to find work in a chosen field.

A second group also leaves as a positive step towards adult life but these leavers have a focus on winning jobs rather than on entering a particular career. However, experience in the job market may spark a vocational interest. While these 'occupational positives' show similar qualities of enterprise, motivation and persistence, they differ by putting more of their energy into job-seeking, and more of them are employed full-time. They are highly focused on winning work. They realise the competitiveness of the youth labour market and already know and have qualities that will give them an edge with employers. Part-time and casual work has been an important part of their lives for a year or more by the time they leave school, and this experience often leads to a job offer. They tend to use short courses to enhance their employability but discount the value of longer courses, so that apprenticeship and traineeship are seen as somewhat remote options. It is striking that their workplace experience seems to have occurred quite independently of their lives at school and any career advice that they received there.

LEAVING BECAUSE OF PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES

There is an element of opportunity in a decision to leave early and for one group, particular events or circumstances influence that decision. As school does not really hold them, 'opportune' leavers leave in response to a definite event. Their patterns of transition are more varied with more uncertainty about work and study options as schooling may have been a negative and contributing factor. In contrast, 'circumstantial' leavers are forced out of school for largely non-educational reasons. The triggers for the leavers in the sample were early pregnancy and parenthood, eating disorder followed by rejection by friends, bullying and rejection by peers, homelessness and abusive relationships at home. There is a thin but clear line between these leavers and the 'discouraged' and 'alienated' leavers. By and large 'circumstantial' leavers do not leave because they are discouraged *learners*, but

because normal schooling is made difficult or impossible. They may be failing educationally, but what forces them to leave is lack of support from the school, friends or family. The patterns of transition are varied—some have clear vocational goals, others wish to work, others are experiencing a mixed transition. Peer rejection or disruption of their social networks is a clear motivation to leave for most young people, reflecting the importance of friendships and peer support in their schooling. The circumstantial leavers have trouble establishing or maintaining their identities as students because they lack this necessary social support. After leaving they may find support, particularly through TAFE alternatives to the School Certificate or HSC.

The 'discouraged' and 'alienated' leavers are discouraged *learners* who 'have not had success in their schooling and whose level of performance and interest in education is low' (Dwyer, 1997a, 12). They are likely to fail in subjects, to find school a negative experience, and be singled out by the school for anti-social behaviour and thus regarded as 'problems'. They may feel that particular teachers have victimised them. Whereas the discouraged leavers are more passive in accepting the negative aspects of school, the alienated leavers resist or rebel. Mostly male, they leave to escape school, sometimes after truancy and behaviour problems. Their experience of transition is more problematic often compounded by their leaving. They are likely to be more 'at risk' than other types with work and study options more limited—both in terms of their own expectations and experience in the labour market. While most have a vocational or occupational orientation, others are stuck with few options encountering more barriers to achieving sometimes unrealistic or remote vocational goals. While they hope the world of work will be more positive than school, their unsatisfactory schooling has given them few skills and robbed them of the self-confidence needed to negotiate a transition to adult roles. The earliest 'drop-outs' most in need of career advice or preparation from school receive little or none.

For working class boys especially, apprenticeship is seen as their best hope, but experience soon provides evidence of a scarcity even in traditional avenues of recruitment. Some of the leavers who identified a vocational interest are pursuing this through a course and are taking on a vocational identity. The TAFE general education option is crucial. For this group of leavers, the alternative schooling offered in TAFE is an important 'second chance' and a means to making a transition. Not surprisingly, other discouraged leavers do not believe that qualifications are necessary to get work, and reject doing courses. Yet their experience of the labour force often proves discouraging. After a year, some of the early leavers are discouraged by the experience of the labour market and say they are thinking of going back to school to do their School Certificate particularly if it will improve their chances of getting an apprenticeship. This wish to 'start again' at school underlines the need for schools to have strategies to support early leavers returning to pursue vocational goals through study.

EARLY LEAVING AND BEING 'AT RISK'

Nearly a year after leaving, most of the young people interviewed retain a sense of optimism about their future. Their circumstances differ greatly and optimism is all that some leavers have. Others have jobs or courses. The contrast between the different types of leavers as described earlier allows us to identify those school leavers who are 'at risk'. Assessing whether a school leaver is 'at risk' can be done on the basis of both the *'type of*

leaver' and the kind of '*transition pattern*' evident in their leaving stories. This is consistent with an assumption of the negotiated quality of young people's transition. A school leaver is 'at risk' if they lack a definite set of options that can be pursued through work, study or both. A young person leaving school is not 'at risk' simply because they leave at Year 10 with a School Certificate. Most positive leavers are not 'at risk' because they have a strong vocational motivation and strategies for achieving their work and study goals. However, those who leave school in negative circumstances are more likely to be 'at risk' especially when they leave before year 10 or without their School Certificate, without prior experience of part-time jobs and an understanding of what employers want in young people, without clear goals for life after school, strategies to achieve or motivation to persist in achieving these goals and without a strong vocational interest or career goal.

Whether a person is 'at risk' is to some extent an arbitrary judgement based on their circumstances and experiences at the time of interview. It is also a judgement about how the young person understands and acts upon their transition difficulties. A young person who is going from casual job to casual job, or is unemployed, or lacks skills and is not taking steps to build their employability (or their lives in other ways) can be regarded as 'at risk'. While short-term unemployment does not of itself signify risk, long-term unemployment does. Living in poor circumstances with housing, income, health or relationship problems in addition to being unemployed also indicates that a young person is 'at risk'.

EARLY LEAVERS AND THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

What early leavers experience on leaving school is very much a function of their community—its socio-economic character, its employment opportunities and its youth support services. The consensus of much contemporary commentary on the need for the rethinking of youth policy by Dwyer, Curtain, Sweet and others is that solutions for the 'problem' of early leaving must entail effective responses at the community level. Better integration of schooling, further education and training and employment options is needed. The concept of the full service school has been recommended (ACEE 1996).

What then can be done to improve the 'services deal' for young people who are the 'negative leavers' most 'at risk' of a difficult transition to adult roles? Major findings of the Central Coast study showed that few schools seem to have a system for providing information to early leavers about their options. Few early leavers received an exit interview. The exceptions are those who make trouble by leaving in which case they might be referred to the principal, or given a folder or leaver's kit with relevant information about local jobs and courses. Few schools provided a reference to leavers. The responsibility of schools to early leavers seems to be minimal and does not currently embrace the idea that early leavers should be followed up via some well-established community based arrangements. This is a far cry from some European models where schools have a statutory responsibility to track their early leavers and monitor their experiences. Although there is a prevailing idea that leavers can 'prepared for employment' before leaving school, early leavers, most in need of this advice, ironically leave before it happens. Most career advice and work experience comes too late for them. Early leaver departure is often too sudden for the school to intervene while the discouraged and alienated leavers who depart under a

cloud are least likely to receive a sympathetic farewell and relevant information although they certainly have the greatest need.

However, the question of better support for 'at risk' students is not only one of career advice and job preparation during the middle years of school. Nor is it only a more flexible approach to curriculum as Dwyer (1997a) suggests, it is also the linkages that might be set up at the local level between schools, employers and community agencies. A major conclusion of the Central Coast study was that young people experience youth support services as a 'cracked mosaic' lacking in integration. The kinds of employment opportunities available to young people are clearly important in their experience of early leaving. What the varied success of early leavers in entering the youth labour market demonstrates, is the way that informal networks can work for them. The 'positive leavers' obtained jobs either through family contacts or through part-time work or preparatory activities *while at school*, moving into full-time work and/or study from part-time jobs, usually in a highly motivated way. These leavers were already part of family or social networks that enabled them to make a transition to more secure employment. The success of the positive leavers in organising for themselves entry to better jobs underlines the linkages that might be established between schools, employers and community agencies to support the more 'at risk' leavers who do not have such resources. In contrast, the casually working or unemployed leavers have a marginal position in the labour market. They hope for an apprenticeship but without much idea about how they can improve their prospects. The formal training system is remote from most of the leavers, who rely on short courses and on-the-job learning to improve their employability.

The point emerging from the study is that the 'positive leavers' call on the advice of family and friends 'in the business'. Even the 'discouraged leavers' value the help of the employment and social security services (such as the former CES) and case managers in preparing resumés, organising courses and work experience. In recommending such 'community-based linkages' to support transition to the labour force there is a need to recognise the movement in and out of jobs which is due partly to the casual and low paid nature of work and partly to young people's changing priorities. This is consistent with Dwyer's views of the negotiated nature of transition - it seems to be that young people learn about work through trying out what is available. What then is the role of vocational education and training (VET) in assisting the transition of early school leavers?

Most (over 70%) of the leavers in the Central Coast study in 1996 had done one or more courses since leaving school. These included, very notably, TAFE general education courses which provide an alternative to schooling (Certificate in Adult Foundation Education - Year 9 equivalent, the Certificate in General Education - Year 10 equivalent, and the HSC). There were strong messages about how valuable this alternative schooling was. Second, short courses provided by the CES, Skillshare, the community college (ACE) and TAFE are valued by leavers whose employment prospects are bleak. Longer accredited vocational courses combined with part-time voluntary or paid work are done by some—yet it was striking how the apprenticeship/traineeship system is beyond the reach of these leavers.

CONCLUSION

It might be argued that early school leavers are such a problem for policy because Australia's VET system remains based on the historical dominance of the apprenticeship system. Linear models of youth transition exist especially for those not entering higher education. Those arrangements have been called 'tightly-connected' and they once helped to facilitate the transition of young people via the TAFE system (Curtain & Sweet 1998). They are now tenuous with the breakdown of the 'Federation settlement and the classical wage earner model' that underpinned it (Buchanan & Watson, 2000).

Curtain & Sweet in summarising the current state of policy on training for young people, asked—

Can VET help young people to make a successful transition to work? The answer is certainly not VET as we have known it. The challenges for VET are those identified by the Finn and Carmichael reports on how best to prepare young people for worthwhile and satisfying employment. These are: the need to embed vocational education more solidly into senior secondary school curriculum, adopt more flexible forms of curriculum among all VET providers, establish closer and more comprehensive links to workplaces and develop qualifications with wide acceptance in the marketplace.

The way forward, from this standpoint, is in education and training arrangements that are more integrated into the local community and its employer networks and support services.

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