# Schools and universities are not railway stations

This paper is a ‘provocation piece’ written by Ani Wierenga and Johanna Wyn, from the Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, for the project: *Revisiting disadvantage: supporting new strength-based approaches to belonging and social inclusion for young people in education*. The project is funded through the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne.

August 5th, 2013. It draws on three research projects: the Life Patterns longitudinal program, the Building Futures for Young Australians at Risk project and Making a Life. The Life Patterns program is a two-cohort longitudinal study of young Australians funded by the Australian Research Council, led by Johanna Wyn. One cohort left secondary school in 1991 and the other in 2005, providing a comparative study of generations X and Y. The Building Futures project is an ARC Linkage project that involves a partnership between the University of Melbourne (Johanna Wyn, Gavan McCarthy, Ani Wierenga and Mike Jones), Social Ventures Australia (Simon Faivel and Duncan Peppercorn), Hands on Learning Australia (Richard Donovan), Beacon Foundation (Ebeny Wood), Foundation for Young Australians (Naomi Berman) and Dusseldorp Skills Forum (Jo Tayor). Making a Life is a longitudinal community study by Ani Wierenga.

## Introduction

For over a quarter of a century, the same groups of young people have fared badly in education. These are young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, young Indigenous people, those with a disability and those from rural areas (FYA 2012; Wyn 2012). These patterns recur across the scope of education institutions for young people aged 15 and over. Within higher education, the Bradley Review (Australian Government, 2008) identifies the need for tertiary education to address the poor representation of young people from the same groups.

Despite massive investments and reorganisations at state and federal level, these patterns of inequality have recurred for decades, largely unaddressed – along traditional fault lines. In addition, research evidence from across Australia (e.g. Bexley et al., 2013) is now revealing the emergence of additional, new pressure points. Young people from other groups – less marginal populations – are showing signs of extreme stress in relation to education. Industry reports (e.g. AYAC 2012), academic research and mass media are carrying stories of growing numbers of young people – more generally – facing educational and mental health crises. A recent study (Reimer, 2013) of 1000 youth workers rated the issues about which young people regularly seek assistance. The top ranked issues were educational, and mental health (e.g. depression, anxiety, suicide related issues), closely followed by income support or social security. In particular, academic (e.g. Woodman 2012), industry, and media reports (e.g. Maslen, 2013) are revealing the problems being experienced by university students.

Governments and educational institutions are failing to get traction on addressing patterns of inequality, and this is a situation arguably getting worse rather than better. These institutions are not well equipped to put in place the policy and practical changes to better assist new populations of young people who are struggling with or disengaging from education.

In this provocation, we argue that these escalating problems are indications that it is time to rethink the relationship between young people and education, in research, policy and practice. Traditional research foci may actually be contributing to the stresses on young people, rather than alleviating them. There is a mounting body of evidence within the education field (e.g. Wilson et al., 2006; Polosel et al 2012) showing that what gets measured gets done, and often with unintended consequences. As researchers, we may have been measuring the wrong things, or not enough of the right things.

A significant contributor to the challenges young people face is the way in which their involvement in education has been conceptualised. In both research and public policy, education has been understood through the metaphor of young people‘s ‘transitions’, and particularly the transition from school to work. Both the intransigent patterns and the emerging new problems raise questions about whether this is helpful conceptual framing.

Elsewhere, Johanna Wyn (2012) has highlighted that the concept of transitions is actually a metaphor, and arguably not the most helpful metaphor which could be used. The problem is that the metaphor of transitions allows us to only see some things, while rendering other important social dynamics invisible.

Through the conceptual lens of transitions, education is understood as a series of pre-determined stages through which an individual must pass. We suggest that the transitions metaphor encourages us to think about schools and universities as if they were series of railways stations, which lead to a single destination – a job. This is an adult or externally imposed way of thinking about education. Young people’s own accounts about their education are in contrast to this approach. Triggered by our empirical work with young people, their trajectories and their life-stories, and our engagement with people and organisations that seek to create educational spaces that are enabling for the most disadvantaged, this paper proposes a different kind of conceptual framing, a different set of images, and a different kind of measuring, based instead on the concept of ‘belonging’. In contrast to the metaphor of transitions, the concept of belonging draws on a relational metaphor. We explore the differences between these approaches by analysing the traditional conceptual frames used to make sense of young people’s relationships to education, and then to contrast it with the messages we hear in young people’s own accounts when they discuss education.

## Framing education as a transition

In a similar way to many other countries, the Australian federal government’s ‘Learn or earn’ education policies are based on the metaphor of transitions. These policies create a particular set of expectations and pressures for young people in relation to the progression from education to work, while at the same time rendering invisible some equally important areas in young people’s lives, such as their wellbeing and other spheres of active social participation and engagement. As this emphasis sharpens within the education policy context, increasing numbers of young people are signaling problems in their relationships to education, and related problems in health and other social outcomes.

Importantly, because of their narrow focus, these traditional conceptualisations of transitions sit uneasily with the ideals and practicalities of social inclusion. Note that while education – or school to work transition – has become the ‘main game’ in a policy sense, engagement in education itself can be understood as proxy for, or way of attaining the deeper processes of social engagement, contribution, citizenship, and social wellbeing. Instead, focusing as it does on a preoccupation with economic and vocational outcomes, success and failure, education has ironically become one of the single most significant mechanisms of social exclusion.

Cuervo and Wyn (2013) note that the metaphors currently in use (transitions, pathways and so on): ‘[position] young people as navigators who make personal choices to invest in education, valorising the structures and relationships that create failure and inequality. What this approach leaves out of the picture is the overlapping structures and sets of relationships which create meaning for young people and that play a crucial role in their decision-making about education and work.’ Elsewhere, Wyn (2012) has highlighted that the result of using the lens of transitions – which is a spatial metaphor – is that it renders visible the individual and their success and failure against a set of linear stages, while at the same time the social context, or the relational elements of the young person’s life is rendered invisible.

For many years we and other youth sociologists, have comfortably or uncomfortably worked with the idea of transitions, further amplifying this particular set of ideas. Now, though, we note the way that ideas of personhood, belonging and the relationship between the individual and society sit at the heart of the sociological agenda. As Johanna Wyn has suggested, (Wyn 2012, p. 13) as sociological research focusses on the relational elements of life, it will be important to make use of concepts which actually support that work.

Now we are working towards articulating a way in which education might be understood as part of a social inclusion agenda. Recognising that schools and universities are not a series of railway stations on the way to a pre-determined destination, and aiming to push beyond the traditional transitions framing, to open up an understanding of educational spaces as highly enabling, we have started to re-examine findings and data from our research projects at the Youth Research Centre. As we do this, we have been privileging the concepts of social inclusion and belonging. Analysing existing data bases, while drawing on inter-disciplinary perspectives, means there is potential to catalyse new thinking about the ways in which young people, and particularly those who are disadvantaged or struggling, access the resources they use to make their lives. By taking a strength-based approach, this type of work can potentially create new knowledge about the ways in which young people – including the ‘at risk’ – are connected to their social context. Among other gains, this approach has potential to better equip us to identify the institutional and learning processes that are positively enabling for young people who are struggling with education.

## When young people discuss education (belonging)

When young people talk about their education, they do this far more holistically than do the policy makers and educational institutions that surround them. Their accounts speak – in quite different ways – to three different types of social dynamics. Their narratives involve firstly who they are and what is important to them (themes of meaning and identity), second, their sense of what they could do (their sense of control or agency), and third, who their people are (connections and networks). Drawing, in new ways, on data and analysis from the *Life Patterns* research program, the *Building Futures* project and *Making a Life*, we have begun to investigate each of these elements in greater depth.

### Meaning and identity

When young people speak about their lives, they reveal that their engagement in education and work is not simply about goals related to education and work, but part of a much more detailed exploration: ‘who am I?’. Longitudinal research, in particular, reveals how young people’s choices about education are made in the context of individuals’ own life stories, or narratives about ‘past present, future and me’ (Wierenga, 1999;2009). Issues of identity are central to future planning.

A significant part of the work young people are doing as they make their lives is about having a sense of not just who they are and where they are going, but who their people are. Ani Wierenga (2001; 2009; 2011) observes that opportunities are pursued on the basis that ‘people like me do things like this’. Elsewhere, (Wierenga 2011, p. 12; Wyn and Cuervo 2012), we have highlighted that young people’s choices about education and work are not made on the basis of information, but on the basis of what is important, like being with loved ones, or staying anchored in a place that matters.

Futures are not an individual enterprise but a collective one. From the Life Patterns study, Dan Woodman (2012:111) explains: … ‘[T]hinking about and shaping the future and enjoying, and coping in, the present are not individual pursuits but shaped collectively with significant others.’ Although typically family relationships have been problematised as a barrier to young people’s developmental ‘task’ of becoming ‘adults’ (Wyn et al. 2010, p. 34), the overwhelming majority of participants’ stories family is a source of support, security and wellbeing, an anchor to belonging.

When young people discuss their education, the *Making a Life* study shows that they also discuss their priorities more generally. They talk about what they want to do, and where this idea has resonated with them earlier in their lives: for example: ‘I want to be a teacher because I had trouble learning when I was young, and this teacher helped me to make sense of things’. They talk about how it fits now with their life priorities: ‘helping people is important to me and I love kids’. They talk about where they want to be: ‘I will be able to work near enough to here, and all of my family are here’. These issues are of central relevance to a study of educational trajectories.

A final point relating to temporality is highlighted in the *Life Patterns* study. In contrast to the transitions conceptualisation, which privileges a future destination, when young people talk about their futures, Woodman (2012) observes how their discussion is inter-twined with their commentary about their lives today. On this point also we note that the transitions / train station metaphor, of everything being geared towards the realisation of a singular future goal, simply does not fit. Additionally, within a social context where employment does not necessarily follow education, this approach which privileges now as much as the future ultimately seems to make a lot of sense.

### Control or agency

Planning a future – at all – is an activity of the privileged. It assumes a stability in life that is not afforded to all. Wierenga’s (2009, p. 82, 180) *Making a Life* project highlights that due to life circumstances, family dynamics, loss of significant others, and lack of other supports, rather than planning a future through their education, some young people live in a state of daily crisis.

In some young people’s narratives something quite critical is communicated. One young person explains: ‘my family moved but I didn’t even know about it until the week after’. In terms of understanding agency, this type of pattern seems to be about the difference of learning rather than to be proactive as ‘captain of their craft’ they are ‘tossed around by wind and tide’ (p. 67). Repeated through life, the result of this type of uncertainty can be a kind of learned helplessness, where an individual learns to not even trust their own judgment (2009, p. 113). The listener can get the sense of a rug being systematically pulled out from underneath them: ‘I used to try to plan things but now I don’t plan,’ she says, ‘because it just doesn’t turn out to be right.’ Wierenga (2009, p. 113) explains: ‘Assumptions about futures and being able to plan them belong to the privileged. They belong to those who come from stable worlds, those who have a measure of control over their own lives, and those who know that they have.’

For other young people, accessing an education can rate a poor second to other priorities, because rather than planning any kind of future, life tends to be more about forms of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social survival, today. This can be full-time work, and might mean that young people’s energies are mobilized and fully occupied managing other more significant challenges, for example a parent’s mental health or alcoholism (see also AYAC 2012 for a discussion of these issues). This study shows that energies are fully occupied, but in terms of understanding agency or control, this set of choices, lived and enacted daily is a powerful testimony about the will to live.

What is shown in to sharp relief in both of these types of narratives is the profound disrespect that the state has shown these young people through its learn or earn policies, which become exclusionary rather than inclusive. In ‘Beyond Learning or Earning’ (AYAC 2012, p. 5), the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition argues that it will be important for education institutions and policy makers to rethink what counts as a ‘positive outcome’ for [so called] low-achievers and the most disadvantaged. The sense provided in our own research is that those young people doing this type of work constantly in their lives feel that they are working through these challenges alone. In terms of re-thinking education within social inclusion agenda, these findings provide some food for thought.

### Connections and networks

When young people talk about their futures and their education, a third type of pattern is revealed in longitudinal data. These patterns manifest differently – less as story consciously articulated by respondents – and more as social practice, or social dynamics observed within the research encounter.

Wierenga explains this point in greater detail from the *Making a Life* study (2011, p. 12). In interviews, when there is a trust relationship between interviewer and interviewee, young respondents do not just tell a simple story about their future, but tend to give a tour of a whole universe of meaning. When they explain what they are doing with their lives, young people reference the people they trust, in statements like ‘But Mum said …’ or ‘my teacher said …’, or the ‘guy down the shop said …’. Those who are trusted, be they individuals, institutions (like uncles, schools, or people working with them in health centres) become sources of ideas, inspirations, possibilities, and possible narratives of self or ‘things I could do’. For example: ‘I could grow things’, ‘I could get an apprenticeship’, or ‘I could go to university’.

The *Making a Life* study reveals over time that social connections with trusted others are not just sources of ideas, but sources of all social goods – from practical resources like shelter, job skills, to transport, educational qualifications and so on. So those who have strong networks of trust relationships have access to many sources of ideas, practical resources, and possibilities or ways to act on their goals, while those who have learned through harsh lived experience not to trust, for example not to trust family, or teachers, or not to trust schooling, or not to trust members of their communities, find themselves cut off from these resources. The implication is that who young people trust is important, in determining their future courses of action.

Wierenga (2011 p. 12) details how, through listening extremely closely to young people’s accounts of their lives, it is possible to map their networks of trust relationships, and how these networks in turn reveal the different flows of resources into lives, into families, and into communities. A catalogue of connections and networks is at the same time a catalogue of resources, and reveals how they are being accessed by the young people in question. In this very practical way, the concept belonging becomes central in understanding how young people access education.

Other research at the Youth Research Centre (McLean, 2011; Farrugia & Watson, 2011) based on young people’s accounts about their own lives reveals how even the most disadvantaged use interpersonal connections to enable them to access important resources, like shelter, sustenance, help, education and/or employment. The research demonstrates the importance of young people’s own often fragile connections, and about recognizing and working with rather than against the strategies they use for building their lives.

In his discussion about social inclusion, Rob Garbutt (2009) raises an extremely useful point. Garbutt explains that in theory, social exclusion has two distinct elements: elements of distribution, and relational elements. He explains that while Australian policy has been fixated on the former, or ‘service delivery’, the latter has received scant attention. Garbutt’s analysis highlights the point at which the type of dynamics discussed above become extremely relevant to research, policy and practice surrounding social inclusion.

Young people’s own accounts provide the basis for more useful ways of thinking about the relationship between young people, education and social inclusion. A conceptual framework based on the notion of belonging is useful because it is strength based, if it acknowledges young people’s priorities, their agency and their connections. There is real potential for education institutions and policy makers to work towards helpful interventions, if they build on the work young people are already doing.

## New pressure points: going deeper in the Life Patterns data

In this section, we focus on the significance of meaning, connection and control with reference to the experiences of tertiary education students who participated in the Life Patterns research program. The program is constituted by two longitudinal panel cohorts. The data presented here is derived from cohort 2, who are aged 24 in 2013. This cohort was recruited in 2004 when they were aged between 16 and 17 and were in Year 11. The original sample (comprised of 4000 young people in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and the ACT) was representative across the categories of gender, school type and socio-economic status, and included an over-sample of young people in rural areas. In 2013 the sample has reduced to 700. Data was obtained from this cohort through interviews with a subset (50 – 80 on an annual basis) and through bi-annual surveys.

The research was specifically designed to understand the transition processes through education and into employment. Young people were asked about a range of aspects of life, including education, employment, relationships, wellbeing and leisure. Given that post-secondary education is now normative, we were especially interested to explore their experiences and attitudes during these years, when they were aged 18 – 24.

We argue that as post-secondary education becomes an increasingly common experience, the post-secondary years between the ages of 18 – 24 represent a distinctive part of life. Drawing on the analysis of the first longitudinal cohort of the Life Patterns research program (who left secondary school in 1991), we identified the several distinctive features about this generation (Gen X), which are analysed in detail in the international comparison with Canadian young people (Andres & Wyn, 2010). The distinctive features include the trend to combine study and work between the ages of 18 and 25, financial stress and living in the family home. Some of the features that we identify may be seen as positive, including the extent to which Gen X are both supported by and in turn support their parents and wider family (see Cuervo & Wyn, 2012 and Andres & Wyn, 2010). This point is also made by Pusey (2007), who analyses the extent of inter-generational transfers of wealth and other support between Gen X and their parents.

However, other features of the ‘education years’ that extend into young adulthood are less positive. One of these, which should be a concern for those working in the field of post-secondary education, is the trend for young people’s mental health to show a downward trend during these years. Participants in the Life Patterns research program are asked at regular intervals to rate their mental health on a five-point scale from ‘very unhealthy to very healthy’. Participants are also asked to elaborate on the issues that impact on their mental health. It is of concern that between the ages of 19 – 24 we see a drop in the mean of rated mental health from 3.72 to 3.57 (Table 1).

The group that experienced the greatest decline in mental health were young women from middle socio-economic backgrounds, followed from young women from low socio-economic backgrounds. These patterns require further analysis, but our preliminary analysis suggests that our findings are consistent with the report on student finances (Bexley et al, 2013) that reveals the extent to which students experience stress associated with managing the costs of education. Young women in the middle of the socio-economic range are less able to access financial assistance than their less well-resourced peers, but may nonetheless experience significant financial hardship.

In addition to this, our analysis reveals that a constellation of factors, including financial hardship and insecurity, that may be contributing factors to the trend towards degrading mental health amongst young people during their tertiary education years. The words of our research participants provide a clue: depression, anxiety, tiredness, insecurity, pressure and stress.

This description by one of the participants (Emily) when she was aged 22 (in 2009) is typical of the experiences of many:

I have overloaded myself with uni, part-time work and work placement. I feel tired all the time and fall asleep on the tram and in class. I feel like I get sick more often because of this, but there’s not a lot I can do if I actually want to turn my university studies into a career.

The pressure of managing the (conflicting) areas of study, work, family life, wellbeing and leisure is a common theme amongst this cohort. Emily, comments are echoed by Lata (aged 24 in 2011):

Mentally I’m drained. I’ve been stressed as my brain never switches off as I constantly think of the uni work I need to complete.

These everyday pressures and compounded by the uncertainty they face. Darren, aged 22 (in 2009) said:

Mentally, I am not feeling as positive as I usually am because of the uncertainty of my future after completing my degree this year. I don’t know if I will get a job in the career I was looking for or even if I will find full-time employment.

These circumstances, and their relationship to reduced mental health can be seen as a regrettable, but limited situation that will be resolved when these young people move beyond tertiary education. Education, like the period of youth can be seen as just a phase that people move through – and get over, just a transition towards a job and adulthood.

But education is not just a railway station on the way to a better destination. The idea of transition that has dominated youth and education policies for the last quarter of a century provides an impoverished view of the relationship between young people and education. The finding that young people’s mental health declines while they are in educational institutions should give pause to rethink the nature of tertiary education, and the responsibility that tertiary education institutions have for the young people who belong there.

As a provocation to rethink the relationship between education and young people (especially the most disadvantaged), we have outlined three key dimensions that would inform this relationship: control, meaning and connection. These are key elements of wellbeing. To the extent that young people are not able to achieve these elements, it is likely that their wellbeing will be jeopardized. The words of the young people in the *Life Patterns* study support the conclusion that the conditions of post-secondary education are ones that strip young people, especially those who are disadvantaged, of control (in the form of financial insecurity and stress and of conflicting demands through combining study and work). It is often difficult to find meaning in this context. So much effort is expended by young people and their families to enable access to tertiary education. Yet many young people experience significant self-doubt about the relevance and worth of this investment to their futures. Finally, the post-secondary years are ones in which connection to significant others and to meaningful activity is often weakened, through the impossibility of having common, shared time. Complex study and work timetables fragment young people’s lives, undermining the very contacts and connections that might support them. At another level, post-secondary study can appear disconnected from the ‘outside world’. Young people go to great lengths to create these connections (such as Emily above, who found a work placement to gain a sense of connection).

## Re-thinking the lens on young people’s relationships to education: concluding remarks

The data and research findings above build an evidence base on which to rethink the processes that include and exclude, and the ways in which education can become a more enabling space, especially for the most disadvantaged. The idea of belonging has long been present in our data, but our analysis has been hampered by the use of a transitions framework that focuses on trajectories, external markers of ‘success’ and limited outcomes. Using a relational metaphor to frame our analysis, be suggest that the concept of belonging has the power to make significant the social dynamics of meaning, connection and control visible. This provocation represents a preliminary re-examination of our data through these lenses, so we can see their potential to inform strategies which might better support young people in education. As this paper is designed to be a ‘provocation piece’ we invite readers to examine their own data through these lenses, and to speak back to us.

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