Making a Difference: Building on Young People's Experiences of Economic Adversity

FINAL REPORT

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian bureau of Statistics
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance on Children and Youth
ARC	Australian Research Council
CD	(census) collector district
GFC	Global financial crisis
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey
HREC	University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee
IEO	Index of Education and Occupation
IRSD	Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage
NGO	Non-government organisation
NPYAT	National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SLA	Statistical local area
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
TAFE	Technical and further education
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSW	University of New South Wales
VET	Vocational education and training
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and Background

The *Making a Difference* Project was designed to explore the perceptions of children and young people (aged between 11 and 17 years) who experience economic adversity in order to understand what it means to them, how they experience exclusion in the family, at school, and in the communities where they live, and identify what services they think can make a difference.

The project adopted a rights perspective which emphasises the importance not only of listening to children, but of using their perspectives in making decisions on matters affecting them.

Over 130 interviews with children and their parents, and with teachers and service providers were analysed to explore implications for the quality, design and delivery of social, educational and other services available to young people facing economic adversity. Key themes identified in recent international research guided the development of the project and influenced how the interviews with the children and young people were conducted and how the data they produced were analysed.

Theoretical Foundations

The project is located within two major theoretical traditions. The first relates to research on poverty and social exclusion. The second relates to the concept of the young person as an active agent who responds to and constructs her social environment.

As the interviews with young people in *Making a Difference* show, economic adversity does not visit people in single variants but in multiple forms. In many cases, young people face not only economic disadvantage but also complex domestic lives, caring and other responsibilities, unsafe neighbourhoods, sub-standard schooling, and few options for out-of-school activities.

The young people in *Making a Difference* experienced both active (external) and passive (internal) exclusion but responded to this in often highly creative ways. These responses – the practice of agency – are to a large extent structured by the environments that they inhabit.

Methods

Researching experiences and viewpoints on economic adversity requires trust, as well as techniques that will support young people to talk openly about difficult, sensitive and often complex issues. The methodology adopted enabled us to gather insights into young people's experiences whilst taking into consideration their vulnerability, while acknowledging that accessing and engaging with them can be challenging.

We focussed on accessing an economically disadvantaged sample that reflected: cultural diversity; a range of ages; gender balance; neighbourhood diversity; and different levels of targeted or universal service use.

A total of 8 sites were selected across Australia, 2 in New South Wales, 3 in Victoria and 3 in South Australia. We recruited young people through organisations that provide services to clients who show their eligibility through means testing, or by accessing young people who lived in areas of concentrated economic disadvantage.

Between October 2008 and March 2010, 96 young people participated in interviews and/or group work, 13 parents and carers participated in interviews and 24 service providers participated in group work.

Among these, some participated through an intensive case study at a site in the Sydney region which we were able to visit regularly over the course of the project. Our contact with the community at this site has been critical to our understandings of the complexities of the young people's lives, and for thinking about how similar complexities may play out in other sites.

The focus of the study was on better understanding the experience of economic adversity and exclusion as perceived by young people and to locate that experience within the various networks around which their lives are structured – primarily, family, neighbourhood and school, and in some cases, the labour market.

The findings in this report aim to describe the underlying circumstances, perceptions and motivations that drive the processes that produce outcomes for young people growing up in the shadow of economic adversity and (for some) in neighbourhood decline.

Experiencing Economic Disadvantage

Many of the young people who were interviewed lived with only one of their biological parents, but maintained contact with the other, and also with other members of their extended families. Many of these families were large and close-knit, with older siblings and distant relatives moving in and out, making it difficult to identify any definitive structure of the household at any point in time. For many young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, large extended families were the norm.

Many participants who had experienced on-going economic disadvantage expressed a narrow range of desires and interests. Adapted preferences is a phrase used to refer to the tendency to deny that one wants things that one cannot have, and that others consider customary. The evidence suggests that where young people regularly experienced the pain of missing out on experiences and activities accessible to their peers, they narrowed their interests and desires as a mechanism of self-protection or to protect their parents from the anguish of having to say 'no'.

For some young people, pocket money was their only source of income, although most did not receive any pocket money at all. Most realised that completing domestic chores provided them with some money of their own that they could use to attend school excursions, and participate in local sports and peer activities like going to the movies and to the shops. Only about a tenth of those we talked to were actually in formal employment. Of these, the majority worked in fast-food outlets.

Some young people appeared to have a good knowledge of the workings of the labour market, and the steps they needed to take to get a job. Young people living in jobless families often appeared to have little idea about work requirements.

Locational Disadvantage

The study adopted a concept of neighbourhood that begins with spatial and administrative delineation but takes into account the subjective views and daily practices of the young people, as well as local labour and leisure markets and services that cross geographic and administrative boundaries.

Four suburb types were differentiated among the eight sites where we carried out our fieldwork. The first three of these are located in the outer suburbs on the fringes of Australia's capital cities, and are likely to be oriented towards their own metropolitan hub where there are key amenities, including Centrelink offices, major retailers and further education services. The fourth suburb type was not geographically isolated, and often had significant transport, social and economic infrastructure.

Young people's accounts of their participation in organised activities drew attention to the value of these activities in broadening young people's horizons and developing networks, and in the development of tacit workforce skills. When compared across neighbourhood types, these stories highlight the uneven distribution of opportunities, and the processes that exclude some young people from participation in the structures that are available.

The underlying processes of inclusion or exclusion differ according to the social demographics within and surrounding the immediate neighbourhood, which implies that tailored policy responses are needed.

Quality of Home, Neighbourhood and School Contexts

Young people were particularly concerned with the quality of their home, leisure and learning environments and consistently expressed the desire for these environments to be adequately maintained, safe and free of vandalism. These environments were interconnected and poor quality environments in one domain had flow-on effects in other domains.

Generally, young people spoke positively about their home environments and the importance of their 'home' to them. Home conveyed a sense of pride, a place filled with stories, memories, family and friends.

Young people's desire for environments that were 'well presented' and not vandalised extended into the schooling arena. The quality of school infrastructure generally was important to young people. While young people mentioned the quality of playing fields, buildings and other material features of their schools, quite a number specifically drew our attention to vandalised and poorly maintained toilets. The way people talked about the quality of toilets in their schools suggests that young people connected the way the toilet environment was maintained to the level of esteem in which they were held by school authorities.

Where learning environments were poorly maintained, young people were less likely to articulate a strong sense of themselves as learners, or to sense that they were valued as learners by teachers and school personnel, creating a self perpetuating cycle of disrespect for learning environments.

Families, Social Networks, Belonging and Obligation

There was considerable diversity in how young people perceived themselves. Some had a very strong sense of individual agency and social boundaries, while others were more collectively oriented and less likely to separate out their own experiences from those of their close circle. The possibilities young people saw for themselves, their understanding of their relative economic situation, and their views about routes out of poverty were also associated with the views of their families and those in the social networks in which they were immersed.

Social policies directed at alleviating economic disadvantage need to be responsive to young people's social contexts – their family circumstances and social networks – and the factors within them that generate well-being in the present, and support them to secure adequate living standards in the future.

To achieve this, urban planning, community, family, and educational policy needs to identify the strategies young people use to manage demands, strengthen the continuities between their experiences, and consolidate a sense of self that is safe and valued within their communities, and where their dreams and aspirations lie.

Economic Exclusion and Educational Disadvantage

The areas where many participants lived were characterised by a scarcity of services and opportunities, such as adequate sport and recreational facilities, public spaces and housing, effective family support services, and access to adequate and secure employment.

These shortfalls in provision place an undue burden on schools in disadvantaged areas. Schools are the main and sometimes only site where social policy interacts directly and universally with the lives of children and young people, indicating a need for services to join up more effectively around schools.

Some young people were actively plotting their education and career trajectories, while others appeared to be swept along by the circumstances of their lives and expressed little

agency in terms of their circumstances and learning. Regardless of where young people fell on this spectrum, they consistently spoke of a desire to learn and to engage in education.

Schooling costs are often at the heart of the decision-making processes which people in disadvantaged circumstances make about the schools they attend and subjects they take up. Voluntary fees are substantial and while many schools had discretionary funds and 'leniencies', these types of 'support' sometimes carried social and emotional costs for young people.

Incremental payment systems for collecting fees for school activities were particularly important for many families. Some schools had systems in place to help students save up for extra-curricular activities and elective costs.

School Organisation, Pedagogy and Economic Inequality

Young people connected their own well-being deeply with that of their families, and feeling recognised and respected as part of these units was very important for them. Families too found it easier to have faith in investing in their children's education (both financially and emotionally) when schools communicated respect for them as people and as citizens.

Many young people felt that their parents had no power as advocates, that their skills and knowledge were not validated in the school system, and that when they advocated on their behalf, they were not listened to.

Where teachers made efforts to provide learning experiences that promoted intellectual quality, these were visible to and appreciated by students. Organisational approaches to homework often appeared to be ad hoc and poorly considered and young people were often given homework of poor quality with little expectation they would do it, and little follow-up on the part of teachers.

When the issue of discipline was discussed, young people associated 'good' teaching with effectively supervised entry and exit from classrooms, the monitoring of noise levels, clear instructions, monitored work, and the clear punishment for non-compliance. Several young people expressed frustration with teachers who failed to maintain basic classroom organisation and standards of behaviour. **Importantly,** when students talked in ways that indicated a high level of engagement with learning, they rarely discussed discipline unless directly asked by fieldworkers. Young people valued approachability in school personnel and spoke highly of those who would take the time to discuss personal, learning and career trajectories and strategies with them.

Pathways In and Out of Participation in Education and Work

Leaving school may be the only course of action some young people see to escape the tensions between formal schooling and the relational circumstances they find themselves in. Of the young people we talked to, fourteen reported that they had disengaged from formal education.

One of the constants to emerge from the 14 biographies of the young early school leavers was that their engagement in schooling was strongly shaped by their social networks and the obligations that go with belonging in those networks. They all described difficulties in establishing themselves as competent learners within mainstream schooling. These difficulties were underpinned by a variety of casual factors, which came together in different constellations in each young person's biography.

Interrupted learning dovetailed with the confusion and stigma of coming from unstable family formations. Managing these parallel complexities had significant effects on young people's engagement with curriculum as well as their capacities to join peer networks.

Second-chance schools offered young people opportunities to get back into steady patterns of learning and socializing. Again and again, young people mentioned the importance of their relationships with teachers, low student/teacher ratios, reduced and flexible hours, and the flexibility of timeframes for learning as features of these schools that enabled them to successfully participate.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The first clear finding to emerge from the study (which echoes that found in many other studies) is that many participants did not have access to an adequate income to ensure they were able to participate in education and social life at a level that most would consider normal for Australian young people.

The cost of accessing services often added to existing financial pressures, and the provision of free or nominal cost services could form part of a policy solution to these shortfalls and their consequences.

The research shows clearly that young people (and their families) develop their sense of self-worth in large part from their environments and when they are housed and schooled in physically degraded environments, this affects their sense of self-efficacy.

The concept of opportunity structures in current policy approaches is too narrowly focused on the end game – on structures that move young people into actual work or educational experience. Disenfranchised young people are typically more concerned in the first instance with opportunities to have secure relationships with others. Once these opportunities are secured, opportunities for educational attainment and employment move up the list of their priorities.

1. Introduction and Background

1.1. The *Making a Difference* Project

Despite two decades of strong economic growth and a relatively mild and temporary downturn following the global financial crisis (GFC), many Australian children still experience a childhood marked by economic adversity. Evidence from the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey indicates that in 2008, over one-in-eight children (13.2 per cent) were living in households below the poverty line – a proportion that has steadily increased each year since 2001 when about one-in-nine children (11 per cent) were living in poverty (Wilkins et al., 2011). The risk of children experiencing poverty in 2008 was over three times higher (28.9 per cent) if they lived in a lone-parent family than if they lived with both parents (8.8 per cent).

Of all the children aged under 12 years in the HILDA sample in 2001, about one-third spent at least one of the years between 2001 and 2008 in poverty, and one in eight spent three or more years in poverty. Poverty among children and young people aged 12 and over was lower than among younger children, but the differences were small; over one-quarter of young people aged 15-17 who lived with a lone parent were estimated to be living in poverty in 2008 (Wilkins et al., op cit.: Table 7.6). HILDA data also show that, while the proportion of families who experienced financial stress (e.g. they were not able to pay their rent or other bills on time), declined significantly between 2001 and 2008, the proportion experiencing financial stress in 2008 remained high – over one-third of all lone-parent families, and a fifth of all couple families with children (Wilkins et al., op cit.: Figure 9.1).

These statistics show clearly that poverty as experienced by children and young people in contemporary Australia is neither rare nor necessarily short-term. And although the statistics are alarming, they cannot describe the realities of poverty as it is experienced or its outcomes for the well-being and development of those affected – particularly children. This can lead to an inadequate understanding of the nature of childhood adversity, but also to an inappropriate response. As Mason and Danby (2011: 188) argue:

> 'When policymakers focus on adults in poor families they fail to take account of the impact of poverty on the lives and experiences of children'.

Getting a better understanding of how children and young people perceive and respond to different forms of adversity is thus important, not only for understanding the nature and extent of the problem, but also for thinking about how policy can best address the needs of children and young people who experience economic adversity.

The statistics cited above relate both to income poverty and deprivation, and to the temporal nature of poverty. Research shows that experience of poverty over several years can have considerably greater negative impacts on children's and young people's development and well-being than a more temporary experience of poverty (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith, 1998).

The *Making a Difference* Project was designed to explore the realities faced by children and young people who experience economic adversity in their daily lives, and to explore their own perspectives in order to better understand *what matters to them*. We did not set out to explore how young people experience economic adversity or poverty over time, but to talk with children and young people who were currently experiencing poverty. As this report shows, however, we found that most of the young people in our sample appeared to be in entrenched, long-term poverty (even though we could not directly observe their families' incomes) and were able to reflect on and discuss the effects of poverty over time. These young people also faced severe exclusion from activities and experiences that most Australian children would consider normal.

The original application to the Australian Research Council (ARC) for funding in 2007 contained the following summary description of what we hoped the project would achieve:

> This project will explore the perceptions of children who experience economic adversity in order to understand what it means to them, how they experience exclusion in the family, at school, and in the communities where they live, and what services can make a difference. The research will examine the forms of social exclusion experienced by children and provide a platform for developing more effective policies. Interviews with children and their parents, and with teachers and service providers, will be analysed to explore implications for the design and delivery of social, educational and other services to children facing economic adversity.

A strong policy focus that would support identification of interventions that make a difference to children's and young people's lives was explicitly incorporated into the aims of the project. Its ambition was to go beyond description in order to examine issues of adversity and exclusion from the perspectives of children and young people in order to better understand the efficacy of policy in addressing their needs *as they themselves see them*.

We used the term 'economic adversity' to capture the constellation of overlapping factors that contribute to disadvantage among children and their families. We argued in our proposal to the ARC that, in practice, most research on poverty and exclusion experienced by young people has relied on information provided by adults, usually parents, and sometimes other experts such as teachers.

This study gives examples of the kind of experiences undergone by youth in economic adversity which provide *insights* into typical experiences, attitudes and difficulties and these insights are valuable for policy development. While these experiences are not necessarily representative of Australian youth because of the sample size, the sample was selected to reflect diversity and many of the experiences recorded here offer insight into the types of challenges that are likely to be experienced by other young Australians whose contexts are marked by economic adversities.

Conventional approaches to the examination of family poverty, such as those articulated by the Nobel prize-winning economist, Gary Becker (1981; 1993) tend to see children's well-being and human capital development as determined by natural endowments and parents' investments. However, children as *individuals* are invisible in Becker's paradigm. Approaches in neoclassical economics influenced by Becker's work assume that children are not active agents, but more akin to 'consumption goods', or passive recipients of goods and services.

This view of the child is still dominant in much conventional analysis of children's (and families') living standards, where the child is assumed to be embedded in a family or household, and to enjoy the same living standard as other household members, with the relative 'cost' of each child expressed as an *equivalence scale*: the share of household resources that the child is assumed to need (and receive) in order to generate equal living standards among all household members. It is this view of the child or young person as a passive recipient of goods and services embedded in the household that the project sought to challenge, or at least to modify by providing a more nuanced view.

The design and implementation of the project was heavily influenced by the work of Tess Ridge from the University of Bath, who was a Partner Investigator on the project. Her work on the perspectives of children living in poverty and facing social exclusion at school, in the communities where they live and among their peer groups, highlighted the status of children, not as invisible dependants, but as agents, actively constructing their worlds, and the worlds of family members and peers around them. As Ridge puts it:

> 'They engage with their lives and their circumstances, developing ways and means of participating where and when they can, and utilising alternative strategies of survival and social involvement through work and play.' (Ridge, 2002; p. 141)

Ridge's research emphasises that these acts of construction are important, not only for children themselves, but also for policy. The *Making a Difference* project has attempted to take up where Ridge in her earlier work left off – to understand better children's and young people's relationship to economic disadvantage in the Australian context, and to explore their use of agency to protect themselves and their families from the effects of poverty and exclusion.

The project was also heavily influenced by the rights perspective which emphasises the importance not only of listening to children, but of using their perspectives in making decisions on matters affecting them. Interest in children's perspectives has been gathering pace for some time. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) states that children have a right to be consulted on matters concerning them. There is now a considerable body of work on the importance of consulting with children, and on methods for effective consultation (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005b; Save the Children, 2003, 2004). In cases of family law and child protection, children's views are now regularly sought (see for example, Community Services Commission, 2000).

As with all participatory or client-focused research, some of this consultation is likely to be tokenistic, while some has a more substantive intent. But regarding poverty, it appears that a different ethic has applied, to both adults and children. Lister (2004) speaks of the 'Othering' of poor people, where the discourses, attitudes and actions of the non-poor can have a profound impact on how poverty is experienced and analysed. Among these attitudes is the assumption of passivity and lack of agency on the part of the poor. 'Othering' is also arguably imposed on children, who are likewise assumed to be passive and subject to the will of adults (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 1994). This project set out to show that while both childhood itself and economic disadvantage constrain social engagement, young people adapt to and endeavour to actively manage these constraints.

1.2. Themes Emerging from the Existing Literature

Following Ridge's pioneering work on the perspectives of children living in poverty, research that directly engages with children has grown significantly over the past decade. When this project was being planned, six major themes in the literature on children's perspectives on economic disadvantage were identified. These related not only to a lack of material resources, but also to exclusion – hence the importance of considering economic adversity as children experience it, in the space of both relative and absolute disadvantage. Indeed, the *first* major theme identified in the literature was that it is usually not economic adversity *per se* that children worry about, but the concrete experience of exclusion that often accompanies it. The inability to participate in certain activities, or the feeling of being undervalued and excluded in the school setting and elsewhere not only hurts, but can also prompt children to reappraise their self-worth and their aspirations (Attree, 2006; Ridge, 2002; Willow, 2001).

A second theme to emerge from the literature is that children and young people are highly creative, and use a variety of strategies to cope with economic adversity. These range from avoiding situations where they might be financially embarrassed, to active measures to increase their own and their families' financial resources. Such measures include supporting parents to allow them to engage in paid employment, and protecting them from financial demands by not mentioning the availability of extra-curricular activities that cost money, or by independently choosing the least expensive of a range of options (Ridge, 2002; Taylor and Fraser, 2003; van der Hoek, 2005).

The third theme in the literature was that families are central to children's lives – children both contribute to and draw on family strengths as a source of resilience (Roker, 1998). But while children often protect their parents from extra expenses, lack of money can be a cause of conflict within the family (Willow, 2001). Family life can be hard for children who experience extended periods of poverty, but the family is also a fundamental source of stability. Without that stability, the risks for children and young people multiply.

A fourth important theme is that children's attitudes to poverty, and their images of it (e.g. not having the 'right' clothing for sports at school or community-based activities) are formed at an early age (Weinger, 2000; Willow, 2001). Some of the children referred to in the literature appear to display a mature attitude to material goods and to the differences in

material living standards between themselves and their peers (see for example Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley, and Davis, 2003). But pressure from parents, and the realities of stratification between (and sometimes within) schools, suggest that in practice children's engagement with other children follows the norms of social stratification (Sutton, 2008; Sutton, Smith, Dearden, and Middleton, 2007).

A fifth theme pervading the literature is the prominence of crime in the lives of many children and young people who experience economic adversity (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Roker, 1998). While some children and young people engage in crime, others fear it and greatly circumscribe their own activities in order to avoid places they perceive to be unsafe. Parental fear of crime can also result in restrictions on children's activities (Sutton, 2008). Moreover, many children and young people (boys especially) not only fear crime, they also fear being wrongly accused of participating in crime (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003). In other words, crime for young people is not an 'opt-in' activity, but a constant presence requiring careful negotiation from young people - in Australia as in many other affluent countries (Malone, 2002).

The sixth major theme in the literature relates to aspirations. While some children enjoy their schooling and prosper with a sense of competency and fulfilment, others feel it is irrelevant and seek other routes to recognition, with many leaving school early (Smyth et al., 2000). Many children (and parents) in economic adversity have limited or unrealistic aspirations for their futures, especially labour market futures (Roker, 1998; Willow, 2001), while many high-school students have a poor understanding of the routes from education to the world of work.

Aspirations clearly have a major role to play in determining longer-term outcomes for children and young people, and schools are important locations for the fostering and pursuit of long-term aspirations. But as the Australian work of Beavis et al. (2004) shows, there is often a considerable gap between what children and young people aspire to be in adulthood and their knowledge of the steps they need to take to get there. But knowledge of the steps, while important, is not enough – the resources also need to be in place to allow children and young people to pursue their aspirations.

As the later chapters of this report demonstrate, these themes guided the development and conduct of the *Making a Difference* project by influencing how the interviews with the children and young people were conducted and how the data they produced were analysed. Throughout the entire research process, we have attempted to acquire a better understanding of these themes from an Australian perspective, and to highlight other themes that appear to have particular importance for children and young people in the Australian context. One such theme, relating to neighbourhoods and locational disadvantage, is discussed in Chapter 5.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The *Making a Difference* project is located within two major theoretical traditions. The first relates to poverty and social exclusion. There is vast literature on both the theory and empirical analysis of poverty and social exclusion ranging across a number of academic disciplines, including philosophy, political science, psychology, economics and sociology. Much of this literature can be grouped under the banner of 'social policy' – seen as an academic discipline in its own right in some countries, and emerging as a discipline in its own right in Australia.

The second theoretical tradition used to locate and inform the project relates to the concept of the young person as an active agent who responds to and constructs her social environment. The new sociology of childhood has sought to underline the role of children and young people as agents, and to propose innovative methods of research with children to ensure that their voices are heard. The concept of children as agents is discussed later in this chapter, while the research methods used to obtain information from children are discussed in Chapter 3.

The aim of this chapter is to set out the conceptual and theoretical ideas that have informed the research and to explain why these particular approaches have been taken. This involves reviewing the recent literature on poverty and on children's agency in order to draw out the themes that have been used to develop and conduct the study. Many of the relevant studies (theoretical and empirical) have been conducted overseas and the insights provided must at times be tailored to make them relevant in the Australian context. This is important if the research is to be grounded in the Australian experience and to have meaning that relates to Australian conditions, values and practices.

2.1. Theories of Poverty and Social Exclusion

In the economics literature, poverty or economic adversity is usually defined as a state in which a person or household has low or inadequate material resources, either according to some absolute criterion or according to one that is community-based. Recently, poverty has come to be widely recognised as multidimensional in nature, and manifested either by deprivation of access to goods and services considered customary in a given community (Townsend, 1979; Nolan and Whelan, 1996; Saunders and Adelman, 2006; Saunders, Naidoo, and Griffiths, 2008), or by inadequate capabilities or functionings 'to lead a life one has reason to value' (Sen, 1983, 1999), or in terms of social exclusion (Atkinson, 1998; Room, 1995; Saunders, 2011).

The need to take account of issues other than a lack of material resources in understanding the factors that create and sustain different forms of social disadvantage is a key theme in the literature on social exclusion. As Saunders (2011) has noted, one of the distinctions between material deprivation and social exclusion is that, whereas the former focuses on what people *can or cannot afford*, the exclusion approach focuses on what people *do or do not do*. Although participation in many forms of social or community activities is often constrained

by resources, other factors such as discrimination, fear or lack of information can also play a role. The concept of social exclusion in particular appears to resonate with the situation of children. A common thread running through the work of Ridge (2002; 2007; 2008) and others is that economic disadvantage tends to be associated in children's and young people's accounts with exclusion rather than deprivation as such. For young people moreover, it is exclusion that matters more to them than economic deprivation - and it hurts more.

As Lister (2004) has pointed out, social exclusion involves a social relationship between those who are excluded and those who are included in a given society. The idea of poverty, not as an income or material status, but more as a position in a social hierarchy, is a powerful one that comes out more strongly in literature and in the popular imagination than in academic research. Lister proposes two alternative ideas of 'the poor' in popular imagination.

The image frequently portrayed in literature (e.g. in the novels of Charles Dickens) is one where rich and poor live in completely different communities, and where contact between them is generally problematic, and only encouraged under carefully prescribed circumstances. 'The poor' are characterised as having their own norms, habits and customs - features that may pose a threat to 'mainstream' society. As Barnett (2006) argues, a diverse range of actors including policymakers and the media collaborate in the social construction of poverty, not only in terms of 'othering' but also in terms of fault – poor adults are seen to have only themselves to blame, and the poverty of children is blamed on their parents.

Lister suggests that an alternative idea of the poor concerns 'good' people, just like us, only with fewer resources. While this idea appears to deny the 'two separate communities' thesis, it often propagates another image, of poor people as passive and helpless. In both cases, poor people are 'othered' – people who are non-poor objectify those who are poor. Underlying both images is the idea of poverty, not as a state of low income or scarcity of other resources, but as a set of economic and social characteristics that are attached to people for the long-term (perhaps for their whole lives), and which govern their relations with the rest of society.

Descriptions of poverty in terms of a social relationship between the poor and the rest of the population often assume one or both of the above ideas. As this Report shows, both are relevant to the analysis of young people's perspectives on living in economic adversity. As the term suggests, social exclusion is not about command over economic resources (although exclusion is commonly linked to a lack of resources), or about a set of specific capabilities or functionings (to use the language of Sen, 1999). Rather, it concerns a set of social processes that lead some people to be excluded from a range of institutions, activities or environments: the consequence is a 'denial or non-realisation of civil, political and social rights of citizenship' (Room, 1995).

As with notions of 'underclass' (Murray, 1984; 1990) where the poor and the non-poor are assumed to live totally separate lives, so too 'exclusion' has come to be associated not only with poverty and unemployment, but also with membership of ethnic minorities, residence in outer urban public housing estates, and other 'socially undesirable' circumstances – the sorts of circumstances often described by the young people we talked to.

The idea of social exclusion as a multiplicity of disadvantages is well captured by Levitas *et al.* (2007), who define it as follows:

> Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. (Levitas et al., 2007, p.9)

This definition suggests that the causes of social exclusion may lie outside the realm of the affected individual. This is the essence of denial of rights, and it also suggests the need for an ecological approach to the analysis of economic disadvantage as experienced by young people (and others). The above definition also suggests that the experience of widespread social exclusion in society may have negative effects, not only on the people who are excluded, but on the non-excluded too. The implication is that it is in everybody's interest to eliminate social exclusion.

As debates on social exclusion make clear, there is little agreement on its definition. However, Levitas *et al.* (2007) argue that most accounts contain both individual and structural elements. Atkinson (1998) identifies three core elements that appear common to most accounts. First, social exclusion is a *relative* concept: people are excluded from a particular community or society, at a particular place and time. Unlike with income poverty (which can but need not take a relative approach), it is not possible to judge whether a person is excluded by looking at her circumstances in isolation. This relative perspective comes through clearly from the interviews with the *Making a Difference* sample: more often than not, young people were clearly aware of the experiences and activities of their more advantaged peers, even if they were able to rationalise their own exclusion from these experiences by considering them not to be important.

The second element identified by Atkinson is *agency*. Examining a person's failure to achieve inclusion has to include identification of the actors causing the exclusion (including the person herself). This focus on the agency of those who exclude implies a perspective not just on individuals but also on groups (e.g. ethnic groups) and communities: actors and institutions that have the power to include or exclude people do not always have a strictly individual focus.

It is worth noting Veit-Wilson's (1998, pp.45, 97) argument that discourses of social exclusion as conducted by policymakers have tended to ignore agency and focus on the excluded to an almost pathological extent. In *Making a Difference*, where our interviews were for the most part with the excluded, we have attempted to develop a perspective on excluders by analysing the structural features that bear down heavily on young people's lives – the physical environments in which they live, their schools, and their neighbourhoods.

The third element noted by Atkinson is that of *dynamics*: it is not just people's current situation that is important but also their prospects for the future. Again, this sets social exclusion apart from conventional income-poverty analyses that tend to accommodate a 'here and now' perspective. In contrast, as (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith, and Stewart, 2003, p.258) note:

> 'While the other approaches (to the analysis of poverty) can study causes and interconnections between different elements of deprivation, such investigation is not part of the process of identifying the poor. In contrast, the definition of [social exclusion] typically includes the process of becoming poor as well as some outcomes of deprivation.'

Atkinson explicitly includes within this element of dynamics, not only people's own prospects, but also those of their children, where parents' poverty, deprivation or exclusion increases the risks for children's social exclusion. This approach means that narrowed aspirational horizons can be incorporated into social exclusion approaches in ways that cannot be accommodated in income-poverty analysis. The significance of this point is recognised in the fact that indicators of educational achievement and employment outcomes are prominent in the Australian Government's list of social inclusion indicators (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2010).[1]

The multi-dimensional nature of exclusion is a major analytical concern of social exclusion analysts. As the interviews with young people in *Making a Difference* show, disadvantage does not tend to visit people in single variants but in multiple forms. In many cases the young people we talked to faced not only economic disadvantage but also complex domestic lives, caring and other responsibilities, unsafe neighbourhoods, sub-standard schooling, and few options for out-of-school activities. Such disadvantages are often described in the literature as *risk factors*. However, while the risk factors for social exclusion are usually clearly spelt out, actual social exclusion is not always so clearly identified. As Burchardt *et al.* (1999) and Welshman (2007) conclude in relation to UK research, there is no clear-cut category of excluded people.

So it is with the *Making a Difference* sample, where many young people reported being excluded in some dimensions (in extra-curricular subjects and electives that attracted additional fees at school, in organised sport or cultural activities) but included in others (e.g. church, family, and sometimes employment or informal sporting activities). This problematises somewhat the social-relation aspects of exclusion discussed by Lister (2004), and highlights a key difference between discourses on 'exclusion' and 'the underclass' (Murray, 1990; 2001). In underclass theory, the poor or excluded are clearly seen as separated from the rest of society. While the economically disadvantaged young people we

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[1] Young people's career and other aspirations, and the barriers to their achievement, are discussed at some length in later chapters.

talked to are also for the most part excluded in several dimensions, several also reported being included in a number of dimensions that they considered to be important.

This difference between 'exclusion' and 'underclass' is a key point for the analysis of young people's perspectives in the *Making a Difference* sample. The young people we talked to did *not* see themselves as 'a class apart', but as part of Australian society. In this sense, they considered themselves to be 'included'. However, obstacles and barriers associated with economic disadvantage nonetheless got in the way of their inclusion in important aspects of community lives. Many could not afford to participate in out of school activities, for example, and found themselves with fewer opportunities to mix with young people who were different and to develop the skill sets that are often accumulated in organised out of school activities. These barriers, discussed at greater length in later chapters of this Report, in part constituted the environments in which they lived their daily lives, and within which they constructed their aspirations.

How young people consider their own inclusion or exclusion is not only important for *Making a Difference,* but also for the study of social exclusion more generally. Barry (1998) cites the following contribution from Professor Julian Le Grand at a meeting at the London School of Economics' Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion:

> A (British) individual is socially excluded if (a) he/she is geographically resident in the United Kingdom but (b) for reasons beyond his or her control, he/she cannot participate in the normal activities of United Kingdom citizens, and (c) he/she would like to so participate. (Barry, 1998, p.4)

In a similar vein, Estivill (2003, p.13) states that exclusion is related to 'the dissatisfaction or unease felt by individuals who are faced with situations in which they cannot achieve their objectives for themselves or their loved ones' and that 'exclusion tends to have a certain subjective content based on material facts'. This is not to suggest that all those who feel excluded are excluded, or that all those who do not feel excluded are not excluded. However, the social exclusion approach does allow space for groups of people to declare their inclusion or exclusion, and to investigate its causes.

By way of contrast, Amartya Sen, who developed the capabilities approach as an alternative means (to the analysis of material well-being) of examining poverty, considers that subjective assessments of one's own situation can be complicated with attempts to retain dignity. As Sen (1987, p. 10) notes:

> 'The defeated and the down-trodden come to lack the courage to desire things that others more favourably treated by society desire with easy confidence.'

In this study, by its nature, young people's subjective views are given priority. However, as the chapters on education show, we also attempt to identify where young people have adapted their preferences to fit their economic situations through examples of where young people profess not to like the things that they cannot afford to do.

The concept of economic adversity that is used to inform this study is designed to capture the key elements of poverty, exclusion and capability deprivation that have been highlighted in the above discussion. It is a broader notion than poverty, which focuses on those monetary dimensions of the issue that can be most readily quantified (using a poverty line approach), in that it also encompasses subjective elements – what people themselves feel and perceive – as well as factors that exclude and restrict the ability to achieve valued goals. In adopting a broad concept, the aim was to avoid inappropriately fitting the issues confronting young people into a box designed by researchers, often to suit their own purposes. Instead, our focus was on how restricted access to financial and other key resources affects what young people can do in and with their lives.

In this report we will use the terms economic adversity and poverty interchangeably and use the term social exclusion and economic disadvantage to refer to the outcomes from economic adversity and poverty.

2.2. Agency Among Young People

That the concept of exclusion resonates with economically disadvantaged young people is clear from the literature on children's perspectives, and from the interviews carried out for *Making a Difference*. Attree (2006, p. 59) states that 'for children living in low-income households life can be a struggle to avoid being set apart from friends and peers' (p. 59). Children often feel left out (passive exclusion) and report being picked on (active exclusion) because they do not possess some things that other children appear to take for granted. Several studies argue that the problem of exclusion increases with age in children's perceptions (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998).

As this Report shows, the young people in *Making a Difference* also experience active and passive exclusion. However, they respond to this exclusion in often highly creative ways. These responses – the practice of agency – are to a large extent structured by the environments that the young people inhabit. Nonetheless, as Tess Ridge's work shows, they demonstrate the extent to which young people construct their worlds with the resources available to them.

Giddens (1984) identifies two characteristics associated with agency: first, that the individual has choice – he or she could have acted differently; and second, that the individual engages in 'reflexive monitoring', which might be interpreted as the actor showing some awareness of his or her actions. Giddens closely links agency to structure (the institutions that shape society), arguing that the former cannot exist without the latter. Agency is constrained by structure, but structure is at the same time a resource that people can draw on in their interactions with others (Finch, 1989). People seek to explain their actions through interpreting their structural environment; this is what Giddens means by reflexive monitoring.

Agency therefore is rational and reflexive, and rational actors respond in predictable ways given the structural constraints that they face.[2]

A number of postmodernist writers take issue with Giddens' characterisation of agency, and by extension, with the more straightforward characterisation of agency proposed by neo-classical economists. Bauman (1993), for example, criticises the modernist project for failing to recognise the unexpected, the ambiguous, the inexplicable and indeed the irrational aspects of human action. 'For a modern mind, such postmodern sentiments spell deadly danger to human cohabitation' (Bauman, 1993, p.33) - and, Bauman might add, to policymaking based on outwardly rational expectations.

The welfare state assumes what Hoggett (2001, p. 53) characterises as a 'unitarist' model of agency, where people 'are the only subject, there is only one of them, and there is no-one else to blame'. Hoggett also argues that the unitarist model over-simplifies the complexity of human action, and suggests that the human personality often avoids reflexive awareness in situations of powerlessness or difficulty. He uses this insight to develop a typology of agency in which the person can engage in *reflexive agency* (the type recognised by Giddens); *non-reflexive agency* – impulsive action that cannot be seen as the result of deliberative rational assessment (at least before, or during the action); *self as non-reflexive object* – a lack of agency or powerlessness that is appropriated by the person as their fate or rightful position; and *self as reflexive object* – powerlessness that is recognised, perhaps as unjust, or something to be lived with, or overcome. Although Hoggett does not explicitly say so, it is presumably actions or situations rather than individuals that are assigned this typology. Thus, a person could be a reflexive agent in one situation, and a non-reflexive object in another.

So it is likely to be with young people living in economic disadvantage, not least the *Making a Difference* sample. However, what struck us in our analysis of the *Making a Difference* interviews was the extent, not only of reflexivity, but also of rationality in a form quite compatible with Giddens' paradigm. Nonetheless, what we got were not always the examples of rationality that policymakers have had in mind when they are designing programs to support young people's social inclusion or continuation in school. For example, young people often valued their physical safety or solidarity with and support for family members over their performance at school. As will be shown later, the young people in the *Making a Difference* sample often had a menu of actions from which to choose, and their choices could usually be characterised as rational (even in a narrow sense), given the environmental circumstances they found themselves in.

Finally, much of the emerging literature on young people's agency has developed as part of the new sociology of childhood. This has grown out of feminist critiques of society, and the analysis of institutional constraints on gender equality (Mayall, 2002). The new sociology of childhood aims to emphasise the importance of imbalances in adult-child power relations in

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[2] This emphasis on agency-within-structure has had a considerable influence on welfare policy in Australia (and in most other rich countries) under the various formulations of the 'active society' approach.

understanding children's perspectives and agency, and in doing research with children. It also aims to emphasise children's *being* – that they exist in the present, and that they have rights and agency *as children* (Qvortrup, 1994).

The implications of these arguments for research and policy are that attention needs to be paid to the present conditions of children's lives, and not just to the structures which support them to be educated working adults. Here we need to consider not only the quality of their education (the main resource to support them to become future educated workers and citizens) but also to the quality of their home lives, of the streets and parks they frequent, of the school playgrounds, and the quality of their relationships with others. In focussing on this distinction between children's lives in the here and now and their lives in the future, it is important to recognise that children and young people are often concerned (in the present) about their futures and that these concerns have an impact on their present wellbeing. Research and policy therefore needs to capture the complexities between current circumstances and imagined futures if it is to make contributions to the wellbeing of our youngest citizens.

3. Methods

As explained earlier, the aim of the *Making a Difference* project was to capture the perspectives of Australian young people aged 11 to 17 years who experience economic adversity.[3] This includes young people's reflections on their relationships with family, peer groups, school and community, and their aspirations. Additional interviews were conducted with parents and service providers.

Researching experiences and viewpoints on economic adversity requires trust, as well as techniques that will support young people to talk openly about difficult, sensitive and often complex issues. In order to do this, we designed a methodology that enabled us to gather insights into young people's experiences whilst taking into consideration that young people are vulnerable, and that accessing and engaging with them can be challenging. This chapter describes the research design and fieldwork strategies, as well as the characteristics of the sample, an overview of the data we collected and an account of how we interpreted and analysed it.

Young people experiencing economic adversity are what Liamputtong (2007) terms 'doubly vulnerable' – they are vulnerable in research situations because of the power relations that exist between young people and adults, and they are also economically vulnerable. Punch (2002) suggests that all young people are vulnerable due to their marginalization as 'minors':

> Children are marginalized in adult-centred society. They experience unequal power relations with adults and much in their lives is controlled and limited by adults (Punch, 2002, p. 323).

Reflecting these features, the *Making a Difference* participants were doubly vulnerable because of their social positions as young people within the nexus of power relations that circulate around low income.

We were mindful of the diversity of young people who experience economic adversity and therefore considered how we could capture this in our sampling. Our research strategy was designed to establish research dynamics that were most likely to empower our participants, and which aimed to deliver insight into experiences that may otherwise be ignored in research and within society in general.

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[3] This project was approved by the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC08162). Additional ethics approval was sought from the following state education departments to allow schools to assist with recruitment, for permission for researchers to contact school personnel and to allow the possibility of using schools as sites for fieldwork: The New South Wales Department of Education (SERAP number 2009309), the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (RIS09047) and the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (approved in June 2009 – basmayor.elena@saugov.sa.gov.au)

Our fieldwork design incorporated several key elements to meet these goals, including a sampling strategy that sought diverse experiences, a multi-method approach that used interviews in combination with other methods to improve validity and strengthen analysis of interview data (Eder and Fingerson, 2002) and an intensive case study.

3.1. Site Selection, Recruitment and Engaging Young People through Multi-methods

Our sampling strategy aimed to capture the social diversity that characterises young people experiencing economic adversity. Site selection for fieldwork was based initially on an understanding of the places where economically disadvantaged young people live, and demographic characteristics of the emerging sample informed further selections. We focussed on accessing an economically disadvantaged sample that reflected the following features of the Australian population:

- Cultural diversity;

- A range of ages;

- Gender balance;

- Neighbourhood diversity; and

- Different levels of targeted or universal service use[4]

Our access to young people was brokered by our Partner Organisations, principally The Smith Family and Mission Australia. The Brotherhood of St Laurence also played an important role in Victoria. These organisations identified potential participants from families who were entitled to a Health Care Card or who had similarly low income levels.[5] We interviewed service providers in all eight of the research sites, and interviewed parents in three of them. These parent and service provider interviews were conducted after those with young people.

The sample consists of 49 young people directly recruited through partner organisations, that is young people whose families were in direct receipt of services provided by these organisations that targeted low income families, and 47 young people recruited through universal services (in one instance a school and in the other a youth service in a disadvantaged area). Of this second group about 50% were living in an area of socio-economic mix and 50% in an area of concentrated disadvantage (these neighbourhood types are discussed at greater length in Chapter 5. The sample thus captures many of the characteristics, and much of the diversity, that are typical of economically disadvantaged young people.

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[4] For example, participating in a targeted service, such as a culturally specific after-school club or a second chance school or participating in an universal service such as mainstream schooling (full-time or part-time).

[5] Possession of a Health Care Card is a common criterion used by these organisations to test eligibility for the services that they offer.

Site selection

Some of our Partner Organisations offer an extensive range of services (most of them targeted) across many locations in Australia and these services were a critical component of our recruitment process. We selected targeted services in locations with diverse demographic characteristics. The specific types of services we recruited through were chosen to ensure we captured diversity in the types of 'family need' that underpins the use of one targeted service over another. Following recruitment through services, we recruited participants through mainstream schools and accessed some young people who did not receive additional support through targeted services.

We also developed other methods for engaging with non-service users, including those who had dropped out of school. Some young people who were disconnected from universal and targeted services were recruited through a snowballing approach. We gave young people we had met through targeted services recruitment postcards to give to any peers whom they thought might have an interest in participating in the research. These postcards circulated within the study sites but young people never used these to contact us directly. Over time, we accessed and sustained contact with a community youth service in a highly disadvantaged area.

Through regular and predictable visits to this youth service (which was in a central position in the community) we were able to snowball through peer networks to several local young people who were not engaged in universal or targeted services. This site became the intensive case study site, and is discussed in more detail later in this Chapter. Through these processes, eight sites were selected across Australia, two in New South Wales, three in Victoria and three in South Australia. These sites were selected to reflect the diversity of cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status and likely experiences of the young people who lived in them.

Recruitment

Not surprisingly, researchers conducting studies of this kind have found it easiest to access young people who are linked in with services (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver, and Ireland, 2009). In this study too, the bulk of participants was recruited directly or indirectly through services provided by our (NGO) Partner Organisations. Key personnel in these organisations supported us to identify services with client groups whose characteristics matched the needs of the study. During visits to the study sites, we discussed the project with local Partner Organisation staff who had a good understanding of the services on offer, and of the local areas they worked in more generally. These service providers brokered communication and, in many cases, built trust with other key stakeholders. In addition to providing young people with information about the study, the service providers also assisted the recruitment process by arranging venues and activities where we met with young people to facilitate further data collection.

We sought out key community informants, including local service providers, in each study site. Where possible, we talked to employment and youth orientated services, local council representatives and government representatives. In communities where significant populations paid respect to community elders, we also sought meetings with the elders. These key informants gave us useful information about community dynamics, and helped us understand the issues in local communities from multiple standpoints.

Engaging young people

Initial site visits enabled us to make face-to-face contact with service providers and make observations on the broader neighbourhood contexts, service systems and the services themselves. Observations were recorded through field notes and included reflections on the general environment, as well as descriptions of the characteristics of schools, play spaces, services, and local shopping centres where young people 'hung out'.

To supplement local perspectives gained from key informants, we collected local background information derived from 2006 Census data and other publicly available data - for example, from local authority websites. The aim of these initial explorations was to support our fieldwork by developing prompts relevant to the local areas and cultures, although the data were also subsequently used to develop neighbourhood typologies (which are described in more detail later). Being able to reference local landmarks and events that were meaningful to young people improved our interactions with them.

The interviews and group work conducted with young people were informed by prior field observation and local demographic data. Eder and Fingerson (2002) suggest that it is essential for all research to begin with some form of field observation and that without these initial observations, it will be hard for researchers to conduct interviews and group work 'in a natural manner' (Eder and Fingerson, 2002: 188). They also suggest that these observations are important for understanding the local culture and language, as well as developing rapport with participants.

Talking to young people about economic adversity is challenging in a world that equates poverty with laziness, irresponsibility and other forms of deficit. We took time and care to enter the field because we recognise that it can be difficult to engage disadvantaged young people in research and that the more care we took with field entry, the better were our chances of establishing rapport with young people. Young people may be difficult to engage simply because they are not used to having their opinions listened to or valued (Punch, 2002).

Furthermore, young people who had had challenging experiences with institutions such as school can find it difficult to participate because of past experiences of 'failure and alienation'. Angwin (2000) says of educational research:

> Working with disengaged and disaffected young people is not easy. They find it difficult to trust outsiders, particularly those who come from 'education'. So many have experienced failure and alienation in their recent school experience that they are often extremely wary as to why people want

> to ask them questions and are concerned about what is going to happen to the information that they might disclose. It takes time to break down these barriers, but for many young people engaged in the research process, time became a barrier for them. (Angwin, 2000, p. 108)

Developing rapport is crucial for engaging young people and ensuring that they feel comfortable sharing their story with (adult) strangers (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong, 2007; Liamputtong, 2007). For us, the process of developing trust with young people began with multiple site visits to service providers before seeking young people's involvement. This was important for developing rapport with the service provider staff in the first instance, because in most cases these service providers (whom the young people seemed to trust) then brokered communication with the young people. Without the support of service providers, young people were less likely to engage in the study and develop rapport with us.

Once a relationship was developed with service providers, we were able to begin communicating and engaging with young people. Like Irwin and Johnson (2005), we did not expect to develop rapport with participants in the first meeting. After the initial visits, we returned to communities having already met many of the young people we were to interview. Fieldwork was conducted as group work or individual interviews. Wherever possible, we adopted the strategy of 'hanging out' prior to data collection in places where young people congregated. This gave young people a chance to observe us and for us to approach them without the intensity of being actually interviewed. This gave the potential participants a better 'feel' for us, and also gave us a better 'feel' for them.

As mentioned, prior observation was important in fieldwork design, including developing the wording of questions. We spent a lot of time refining the wording of questions in order to develop a trusting relationship at the beginning of the interviews and group work. All interviews and group work began with asking participants to complete a short questionnaire comprising 12 questions: the respondent's age and sex; where they were born; their Indigenous status; who they lived with; whether they went to school or were in employment; their postcode and housing situation; and the main source of income coming into their household (see Appendix A). We often helped the respondents in completing this questionnaire.

The interviews mostly comprised open-ended questions around young people's everyday experiences. This included exploring their knowledge of the types of activities that young people typically participated in at home, at school, and in the neighbourhood.[6] Having obtained this basic information, we could ask them about what they might be missing out on because of economic shortfalls. This exploratory approach served three functions (Ridge, 2007): firstly, it honoured the protective mechanisms young people may have had in place to buffer them from the stigma of missing out; secondly, it potentially minimised leading

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[6] Ridge (2007) suggests that economically disadvantaged young people often know less about local resources than their better-off counterparts.

questions; and finally, it enabled us to develop rapport by beginning with young people talking about what they identified as important.

Punch (2002) talks about the importance of clarity of language and of recognising that methods may need to be adapted for age. By piloting our methods in the initial stages we were able to refine the questions and ensure that the language used was age and culturally appropriate.[7] Question schedules used phrases like 'being included' and 'missing out', 'when the money's tight', and avoided introducing terms such as 'poor', 'poverty', 'underprivileged' and 'social exclusion'. We also picked up the terms young people themselves used and then proceeded through the interview using these preferred terminologies. For example, the use of the term 'poor' was commonly used by young people to refer to 'other' people:[8]

> *Like the people in poverty* (Robert, male, 13 years, SA)

> *Other people like poor people* (Amy, female, 12 years, SA)

> *Like make stuff easier for them for poor people or give stuff* (Tony, male, 11 years, Victoria)

> *I'm not poor* (Rhianna, female, 14 years, NSW)

We did not use any of the terms used by young people that we felt were derogatory.

The pilot study allowed us time to develop a balance between sensitivity and stigma in order to focus on the most salient aspects of economic adversity and its effects. An early analysis of our pilot data showed that we were not asking directly enough about young people's financial situations, and so we revised our schedules and approaches to address this early finding in later interviews.

3.2. Consent

Young people may have limited opportunities to engage in research and it is thus likely to be seen as an unfamiliar and intimidating process. To ensure that young people were comfortable with the process and understood the purpose of participation in the study, our recruitment approach offered multiple opportunities to 'opt in' by offering young people the choice to participate in group work or an individual interview, or both.

In line with other studies (e.g. Esbensen et al., 1996), the participants had to 'opt in' rather than 'opt out'. This was important for ensuring that young people did not feel that there would be negative consequences for non-participation. Some young people may have

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[7] This also allowed us to gain insight into current terminologies and language used by young people. While terminologies were not necessarily transferable across communities and States, they did provide a point of interest for young people in discussions.

[8] As explained later, the names attributed to the participants were chosen by them and are not their real names.

perceived 'opting out' as having consequences in terms of their relationships with service providers, or perhaps thought that their responses in interviews would be reported to service providers. As part of the consent process, we made it clear to participants that everything they told us was confidential, and that service providers would not be informed of what they said.

Young people were also asked for their consent to participate at several points throughout interviews and group work. Heath et al (2009) call this 'process consent' whereby consent is negotiated on an on-going basis rather than assuming initial consent carries through the duration of the interview. This is also important for giving young people a greater sense of control over the research process.

In addition to obtaining consent from young people themselves, parental consent was also sought for most young people aged under 18 years (unless they were receiving Independent Living Allowance). However, parental consent was only sought where the young person had expressed an interest in participating in the study. It was made clear to young people that parental consent did not mean they had to participate; it gave them the option to participate if they chose to do so. We also made it clear to young people that if they changed their mind and decided they did not want to participate on the day of the interview or group work (or even during the interview itself) they could withdraw and still receive the voucher (see below). This was intended to minimise the possibility that young people might feel 'coerced' into participating, and maximise their confidence that they had control over their decision to participate. In many cases, workers were very helpful in contacting parents to obtain the necessary consent.

The researchers used their prior experience in research with vulnerable groups to assess whether each young person understood the participant information and consent form and also the questions throughout the interview. If at any stage it became apparent that they did not have the capacity to provide informed consent, the interview was stopped.

3.3. Multi-methods

Semi-structured interviews with young people were at the heart of our qualitative methods. The schedules and tools used to guide the data collection are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B. Young people received a $25 voucher as compensation for their time and for sharing their experience with us. They were asked to select a pseudonym that we could use when retelling their experiences in this report, and in other publications and presentations.

As mentioned above, alongside the one-on-one interviews we offered the options for young people to participate in group interviews. This enabled participants to choose the social environment they felt most comfortable with. Interviews allow researchers to see individual attitudes, opinions and experiences which may not be captured through group work (Eder and Fingerson in Liamputtong, 2009). On the other hand, group work can be important in gaining a sense of how young people interact with one another. Group work also provided us with insights into what was permissible to talk about with peers and what was not. Those who participated in a group and then chose to participate in an individual interview had an opportunity to better understand the process before participating in the more intensive

interview. In the group work, they were able to gain information about what we were interested in and then, during the interview, were able to refine or share ideas and experiences they had not wanted to share in the more public context of a group interview.

We also offered young people opportunities to participate in visual and task-based activities during the interviews and group work (see Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry, 2009; Kirk, 2007; Morrow, 2001; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005c). The visual and task-based activities included the following (examples are provided in Appendix B):

> *Socio-gram of social networks* – young people were provided with an A4 sheet with a simple face in the middle representing the young person and the heading '*My family and friends*' and asked to draw anyone that they thought was important to them. Young people drew complex and creative drawings of their social networks, and a series of questions were then asked around their drawing;

> *Diary of weekly activities* – young people were given an A4 sheet with circles for the seven days of the week, and were then asked a series of questions about the activities and services available in their neighbourhood which they used on different days.

The New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People (2005c, p.64) argues that multiple methods can 'reduce the power imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship'. Barker and Weller (2003) also suggest that using a range of visual methods can make young people feel more comfortable and therefore enable them to create their own message. Interviews and group work on their own may make young people feel pressure to respond immediately to researchers' questions.

Visual and task-based activities, on the other hand, give young people more time to gather their thoughts and put them down on paper, and also to make changes more easily (Punch, 2002). These visual activities can also reduce the pressure on young people to talk and can make the process more enjoyable. Einarsdottir et al. (2005, p. 229) note that drawing in particular allows young people to 'interact on their own terms'. Visual and task-based methods can also act as prompts for young people in interviews, particularly when reflecting on their physical environments (Morrow, 2001). This was particularly important for the present study as we were interested in young people's perspectives on their schools and neighbourhoods.

3.4. Sample Characteristics

Table 3-1 shows that between October 2008 and March 2010, 96 young people participated in interviews and/or group work, 13 parents and carers participated in interviews and 24 service providers participated in group work. New South Wales was the only state where young people participated in both an interview and group work.

Table 3-1: Total Number of Participants by Data Collection Method

	Interviews (only)	Group work (only)	Both	Total
Young people	74	29	7	96
Parents and carers	13	0	0	13
Service providers	0	24	0	24
All participants	87	53	7	133

Table 3-2 provides a breakdown of the study participants in each of the three participating States. The total numbers of participants, and the numbers of young people, were about the same in NSW and Victoria (about 50 and 37, respectively), while totals in South Australia were smaller. No interviews or group work were conducted with parents or carers in Victoria, although most of the service provider interviews were carried out in Victoria.

Table 3-2: Number of Participants by State

	New South Wales	Victoria	South Australia	Total
Young people	37	38	21	96
Parents and carers	8	0	5	13
Service providers	4	14	6	24
All participants	49	52	32	133

The sample of young people as a whole is diverse, although no attempt was made to make it representative of the Australian youth population. Figure 3-1 shows the gender and cultural background (as identified by the respondents) of the young people who participated in the study. The largest group (61 respondents) were Anglo-Australians. The majority of girls interviewed (35/53) were Anglo Australian. The second largest group were of Pacific Island/Polynesian heritage with 18 respondents, followed by young people of Arabic heritage and Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Figure 3-1: Cultural Background of Young People by Gender
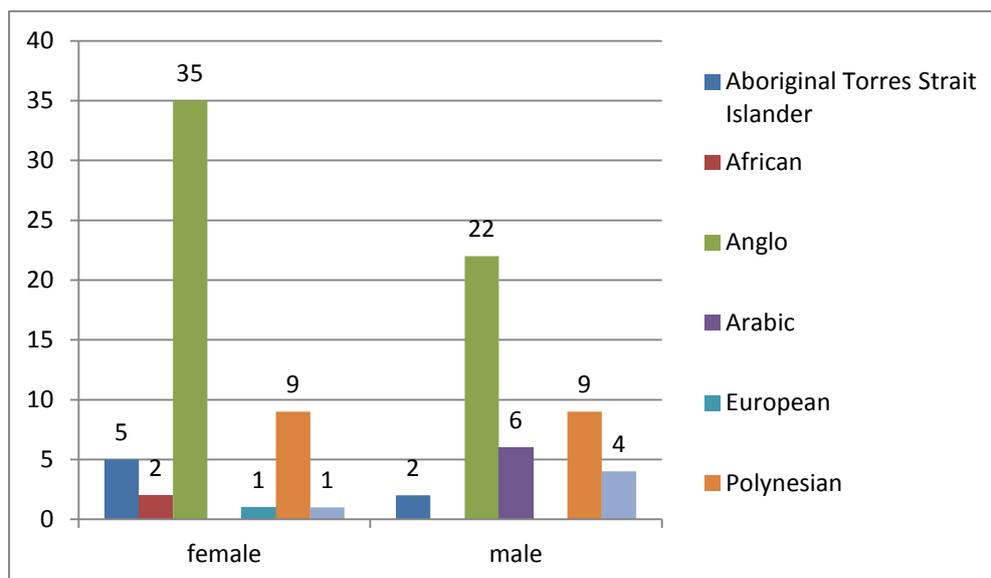
Figure 3.2 shows the age ranges of study participants. Numbers were fairly evenly distributed across the 11-13, 13-15 15-17 age ranges. There is a much smaller sample of over 18s. The study was not originally intended to capture the experiences of over 18s, but a number were using second chance schools where we recruited and a number were picked up through snowballing.

Figure 3-2: Number of participants by age
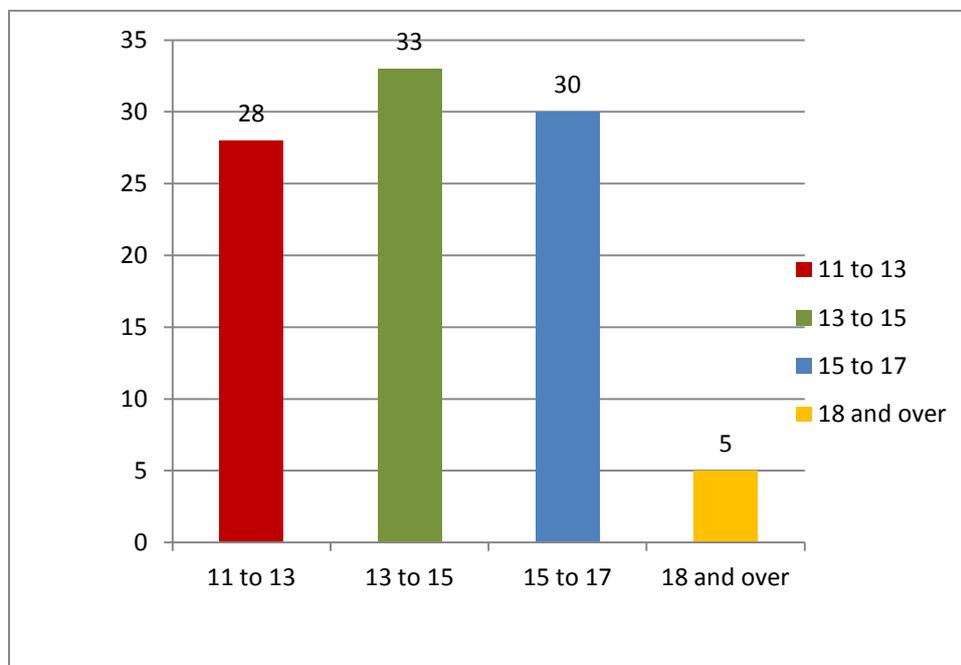
Figure 3-3 illustrates the number of participants by income source. It is important to note that many of the families who were working were in and out of short term or casual work. We

identified families who were working outside of regulated business structures as those in the cash economy. This figure only relates to young people who directly told us their family members were working for cash in hand (we did not directly ask young people about this).

Figure 3-3: Number of participants by family income type
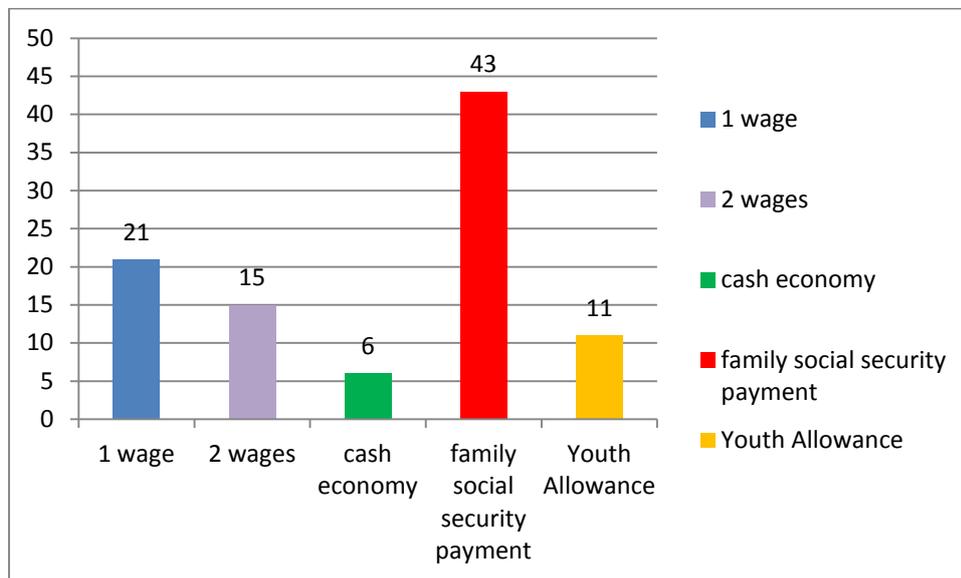
Finally it is important to note that 82 of the sample were in formal schooling and fourteen had left school.

3.5. Questions of Interpretation

The research for *Making a Difference* took place in the context of powerful discourses about people (and especially young people) in poverty. Young people growing up in high poverty contexts are exposed to discourses that individualise responsibility for economic disadvantage and often suggest that people (their parents) who have children in conditions of poverty are irresponsible. Parents are perceived as irresponsible because the additional costs of supporting children are seen to exacerbate their poverty, and, even more irresponsibly, they are raising their children into potential poverty (Ridge 2007).

These discourses are an important contextual feature to consider when interpreting young people's views about economic disadvantage. Ridge's (2002) study found that young people in the UK were aware of the stigmatising discourses of poor families and quick to challenge them. This type of challenge was also apparent in young people's discussions in our study. We dealt with this issue through the way we asked questions and in our processes of interpretation.

When asking young people about their financial situation, interviewers introduced the topic with broad questions. Frequently, young people responded to these introductory questions in ways that underscored their parents' capability as providers for them. Responses ranged from '*Actually I get whatever I want*' (Omar, 13 years, male, Arabic-Australian*)* to more measured statements. The following response pattern was common to a number of participants:

> Interviewer: *Can you tell me about your money situation, so where do you get your money from?*
>
> Linox: *My dad.*
>
> Interviewer: *So he gives you money, every week or when you need it?*
>
> Linox: *Just when I ask for it.*
>
> Interviewer: *And what sort of stuff do you need money for? What do you spend money on?*
>
> Linox: *Clothes and that. He just gives me $100 and I say I want to buy shoes, he will just give me $100. Just depends on what I want to buy.*

While this comment taken in isolation suggests the family's access to money was adequate, other details paint a different picture. Linox, a large, softly-spoken 17 year old from a Pacifica-Australian family of 9, was 'finding it hard', by his own admission. He was not in education, training or employment or in receipt of any government benefit. His well-worn shoes and clothes were visible clues to hardship and it was quickly apparent that he rarely had bus fares to access employment or other services.

> Interviewer: *Do you ever not ask [for bus fare] because you are worried that your family doesn't have enough?*
>
> Linox: *Yes. A lot of my family use it more than I do. I don't need….*
>
> Interviewer: *What kinds of things do you miss out on?*
>
> Linox: *Like say if I wanted, like stuff, shoes and that. Like this week I really needed, but parents just say they can't, but yes, those kinds of things.*

These contradictory answers can be understood by drawing on other aspects of the narrative. Typically, when young people asserted that their family provided adequately for them **and** talked of missing out on essential goods and services, they also gave accounts of family as a source of emotional care and support.

The trump in Linox's story unfolded when he told us his family supported him to deal with his sense of entrapment in unemployment and peer related violence. He told us his favourite family time was when:

> *We all get together and talk, like when stuff is wrong with the family, and we all get together and have family talk and sort everything out.*

Young people's reluctance to make definitive statements about missing out could be interpreted as resistance to discourses that hold parents responsible for young people's deprivation. In contrast to this discourse, many expressed a desire to have their families recognised as sites of caring and competent childrearing.

Just as young people were quick to assert their family's capability to provide for them, they also were quick to emphasise their own capabilities and, therefore, to assert their rights to

independence and autonomy. This had an impact on their discussions about danger and safety. During the earlier parts of the interviews, many young people emphasised the safety of their neighbourhoods and the ease with which they felt they were able to move around independently. When asked directly whether they felt safe in their neighbourhoods, young people generally responded positively.

However, as the interviews progressed and rapport developed between the young person and interviewer, contradictions to these surface statements began to emerge. Often, it was not until quite late in the interviews that young people began to allude to dangerous elements of their neighbourhoods (such as gang fighting, violence and drug culture), although they rarely overtly stated that they felt unsafe. This may be because explicit admission of danger and lack of safety may compromise their ability to move freely by inviting adults to impose constraints. Alternatively, young people may have a sense of confidence in their ability to negotiate the dangers that they may encounter. Overall, young people's responses generally supported the view they were safe to move around; however, careful listening to their discussions of danger and threat in the broader context of the interview suggested their involvement in complex negotiations that secured safety and independence.

Various tensions in young people's desires (safety and freedom, stigma/shame and pride) were evident in their narratives. In the face of these tensions, we conducted our analysis by listening to the whole story of each young person; we then used NVivo to code for main themes and returned (sometimes many times) to the full transcript or digital recording in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the issues. This method of analysis avoided the 'cherry-picking' of quotes that can occur when using coded NVivo data in isolation, and allowed the full multiplicity and contradictions of young people's experiences to emerge.

By carefully examining the full story as told by the young person, it became possible to pick up on the inconsistencies in how young people articulated their sense of independence, danger and safety. Furthermore, listening to the whole interviews meant that young people's responses could be analysed within the context of their pauses, vocal tones and cues, which occasionally contradicted their actual spoken words. (Example: young people who say something like 'I don't feel safe, but I'm not scared' – Max, male, 14, VIC – but their tone would indicate that they either had to think about it, or they weren't quite sure or convinced). This resulted in a more nuanced analysis, while reliance on coded data alone would not have revealed this level of detail and reflection.

Some of the themes we pursued through our analysis required examination of the whole dataset (e.g. we wanted to know how much pocket money and independent spending our cohort had access to). Other themes – such as locational differences or early school leaving – required categorisation of young people into subgroups and examination of patterns across and within the sub-groups. In this report we have drawn more heavily on the stories of some young people than others because their narratives conveyed observations that eloquently expressed, not only their own experience, but also the experience of others.

These reflections illustrate the key point that researching the perspectives and experiences of young people experiencing economic adversity requires techniques that support young people to feel comfortable sharing their stories, and care must be taken in interpreting results. The *Making a Difference* project developed a method which attempted to take into consideration the vulnerability of young people (particularly those living in economic adversity). It also sought to take into account the fact that young people can be difficult to access and engage in the research process.

The researchers therefore placed high importance on developing rapport with the young people in order to empower them in the research process. One of the key strategies of empowerment was developing a multi-method approach that allowed young people to choose from a number of options their mode of participation in the study. Most young people were able to choose between participating in groups or individually, or both. Some young people were afforded extra opportunities for participation through more casual encounters with the researchers, and through neighbourhood walks and other activities. These extra opportunities arose for the most part in one intensive case study site, which we turn to next.

In summary, our fieldwork experience confirmed what the literature has been saying for some time – the more opportunities for engagement, the richer the stories that emerge. As is the case with all research projects, we faced a number of constraints in our fieldwork. The findings described in this report are partly the result of these constraints, and partly the outcome of our strengths and shortcomings as researchers.

3.6. A Special Case: The Intensive Case Study Site

We conducted one intensive case study at a site in the Sydney region which we were able to visit regularly over the course of the project. In this site we were able to have sustained contact with a range of community members and conduct additional fieldwork with young people, parents, carers and service providers. This sustained contact allowed us to:

- pilot the instruments to inform the interview schedules for other sites;

- gain an in-depth view of the complexities of community life for young people;

- make contact with young people who did not use services and were wary of strangers;[9]

- utilise a range of methods to facilitate communication;

- get to know young people before they were interviewed;

- conduct follow-up interviews; and

- gain young people's feedback on preliminary findings.

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[9] Particularly Pacific Islander and Anglo boys in the 15-17 year old age bracket.

Our contact with the community at this site was critical to our understandings of the complexities of the young people's lives, both in this particular site and for thinking about how similar complexities might play out in other sites. Over time we were able to gain an understanding of the dynamics between the different subcultures and institutions that shape everyday life in this deeply disadvantaged community.

Our connection with this site was initially through one of our Partner Organisations and we conducted a number of preliminary meetings with other service providers in the area. We met with staff in local housing authorities, the primary school, employment support services, people affiliated with churches, and people who ran community programs from their homes. In the course of these meetings we visited the local youth service which was clearly very well thought-of among the community.

What follows is a reflective piece about the experience of fieldwork in this site.

Initially, the youth workers were sceptical of us, as researchers. We came to understand that the community had a history of politicians and senior bureaucrats parachuting in before elections, making promises and then disappearing. Indeed, their prior experience of researchers was as academics who came in to do a quick data sweep and then, like the politicians and bureaucrats, were never heard of again.

At our first contact, the youth workers glanced at our information and consent forms, and told us that we could bring pizza one afternoon. We came with our boxes of pizza the following week and were promptly left to fend for ourselves among a group of young people who were – like the workers – sceptical of outsiders. As the entertainment for the afternoon, we walked about, went to the toilet, perched on the end of the overstuffed ragged couch and tried to make small talk, and missed out on the pizza. Young people rough-housed each other loudly around us and, for the most part, ignored us. Generally, it was very uncomfortable. Nonetheless, we were allowed to come another day, followed by another. These trials imposed on us by the youth workers were in fact 'wise practices'; they tested our resolve and commitment to understanding the lives of disadvantaged young people. Having had to sit with the discomfort of being 'out of place' meant that when we actually came to interview the young people we were much more 'in sync' with their everyday realities than we otherwise would have been.

Everyone was gracious enough to let us think we passed their many 'tests', and over time we developed warm relationships with the workers and with many of the young people. Eventually news of our project, and the perception that we were 'OK', spread via word-of-mouth through peer networks. We attracted a few young people who did not even use the youth service.

The service was centrally placed, everyone walked past the building, and news of our vouchers and pizza spread. Soon we were conducting interviews on the sharp dry grass of the denuded creek bank, having the run of the office, sitting on the sidelines on the crumbling bitumen patch that served as a basketball court, standing out the front watching as police

came by in response to the latest trouble. Sustained contact with the youth centre allowed us to eventually talk to young people who were significantly disconnected from services. This would not have been possible without sustained support of the service providers at this location.

Furthermore, over time we learnt about less obvious dimensions of life in the community – including about a group of older men who were working together to keep boys from their community out of trouble once the sun went down. We talked to families who lived within the area, and also to those who lived outside its borders but who had had previous associations with the school or with other organisations based in the area. We met young adults who had grown up in the suburb and in neighbouring suburbs who now worked with young people.

Perhaps one of the most telling stories of the area was from one of these workers, born and raised and now working in the area. This young woman of about 20 years of age told us that she was sitting at the back of the local bus when one of her old school friends sitting down the front of the bus with her three small children called out to her 'Hey, Welfare, how's it going?'. The generous sharing of these stories helped us to come to better understand the local dynamics, and we slowly asked better questions of young people and came to deeper understandings of their experiences.

We spent time in this site in the blazing heat of summer, the beautiful days of early autumn and the cold of winter. After rain, the lemon-scented gums perfumed the air, the grass became green and lush and the place was beautiful. We came to know the gardens that were cared for and the everyday achievements of residents. We drove past burnt-out houses that were boarded up and not repaired during the time of the study. We kept an eye on the streetlights that the young people had shown us were broken and saw that they had not been repaired either. We listened for news about the community consultation process that had been going on for years, and waited for it to be put into action. We read articles in the newspapers saying that the schools were again fighting for their additional funding. We knew where the young people had fun and the places it was good to stay away from. Some of our participants with histories of mobility moved away, and those with histories of stability stayed.

The main feature of our work in this site was sustained contact over a period of 18 months that allowed us to conduct additional fieldwork and use alternative methods with young people. These methods included:

Photo walks – 8 young people participated in a walk of their neighbourhood with disposable cameras. We walked with these young people around their neighbourhood as they pointed out sites of relevance to them, and shared stories whilst taking photographs. Some young people took pictures of family, friends, or pets, or of their home. Others took this as an opportunity to make suggestions as to how their neighbourhood could be improved.

We printed the photos and returned them to the young people at a sleep-over youth camp. Whilst on the camp, we interviewed young people about their photos, what they meant and

why they were significant. The photographs allowed young people to depict things that were important to them and to guide the research (Rudkin and Davis, 2007). Furthermore, participants were able to position themselves a comfortable distance from the subject matter that might otherwise be difficult to share. We found that young people in this situation were able to tell more detailed stories about their families and share some of the more difficult experiences they had with bullying and neighbourhood dynamics.

Feedback interviews – In these interviews, we presented a number of participants with our initial analysis of the data and sought their views on how accurately we had captured their experiences. This feedback included some local mapping of opportunity contexts (described later) and contributed to our understanding of the initial findings. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005c, p. 31) suggest that this is important for the analysis stage and for getting young people's 'ideas about the research findings'.

This study site was crucial for our instrument development, our interpretation of the interviews conducted in other sites – particularly in terms of assessing whether we had established rapport or were operating within a framework of 'right answers' – and for our capacity to expand our analysis beyond a cross-sectional snapshot. Through sustained contact with one community we developed more complex understandings of the ecologies of communities experiencing economic adversity and their impacts on young people more generally.

4. Experiencing and Coping with Economic Disadvantage

4.1. Introduction

Most young people facing economic adversity lead complex lives. This is one of the fundamental assumptions underpinning the social exclusion approach to the analysis of poverty discussed in Chapter 2. This complexity stretches to issues of access to and use of material resources as well as to issues such as relationships and emotions. This chapter examines young people's access to material resources, and the extent to which the resources of the household they live in accurately reflect their own living standards and capabilities.

This question is important for a number of reasons. First, money is the main policy lever available to governments to support households on low incomes. Second, household income is by far the most common indicator used to measure of people's living standards. Third, as the discussion in Chapter 2 argues, while young people often experience the sharp end of economic disadvantage through being excluded, the real material basis of this exclusion should not be ignored. A decent income is one of the necessary ingredients of what Rawls (1971) posits as "the social bases of self-respect". What we aim to show in this chapter is that young people and their families need money if they are to participate fully in the life of the school, or the community.

Money is one of several things most young people in the *Making a Difference* sample lacked. This chapter draws mostly on social exclusion approaches, and on the literature on children's perspectives on living in poverty (Redmond, 2008), to build a framework for exploring young people's perspectives on money, income, and economic adversity.

Our purpose is to identify some of the factors that have contributed to the economic adversity young people face, the things they do to help them cope with it, and prevent them from escaping it. The emphasis in the social exclusion approach is that people are at risk of being excluded when the resources and capabilities that they have access to fall well below community norms. In this way, external standards and norms affect what people strive for in terms of their own possessions and can affect their perceptions of themselves, as well as others' perceptions of them.

4.2. The Literature on Young People and Economic Disadvantage

As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of household income in conventional studies to estimate the living standards of individual household members is based on four key assumptions: first, that the household operates as, and can thus be treated as, a single economic unit; second, that identification of household members is straightforward, and that household membership is relatively stable; third, that all resources coming into the household are placed into a 'common pot', and then shared equitably so that all household members have the same standard of living; and fourth, that it is possible to apply an adjustment to household income (an equivalence scale) that allows the living standards of households of different size and composition to be calibrated onto the same metric.

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All of these assumptions have been tested at different times, for example through studies of household expenditure and the costs of children, and whether women spend their personal incomes on different household items than men, or whether certain types of income such as family allowances are (consciously or otherwise) allocated to a particular purpose (Falkingham and Baschieri, 2004; Kooreman, 2000; Middleton, Ashworth, and Braithwaite, 1997); or through studies which question the role of children in the household, or more broadly the unitary nature of the household (Ermisch, 2003; Folbre, 1994).

Although many of these studies produce findings that are not consistent with the assumptions identified above, they have had remarkably little influence on the methods used to identify living standards and measure poverty. More pertinently in the current context, these issues have not been adequately addressed with respect to young people in the age range 11-17 years who, unlike younger children, have a degree of independence from their families. Moreover, the views of young people themselves have not been adequately incorporated into this literature. Our aim is not to transform conventional approaches to the measurement of household income and poverty, but rather to bring to the attention of a wider audience how young people's own perspectives can complicate and confound estimates and calculations of their economic position.

Our argument is therefore not that conventional measures of household income and poverty are more deficient than previously thought (their deficiencies are well known), but that they need especially careful interpretation when the lives of young people are being considered. This is perhaps even more the case for young people than it is for younger children, since many of the activities that they engage in, and that are particularly important to them, take place outside of the immediate family context. The extent to which they can engage in these activities can depend, not only on family resources, but also on their own initiative.

One aspect of young people's lives that comes through from the interviews carried out for *Making a Difference* is that young people are economic agents. Our suspicion is that how young people use this agency may have more significant consequences in the case of young people who experience economic disadvantage than in the case of young people who do not experience disadvantage. The interviews also suggest that with respect to the second assumption listed above, household membership is far more fluid in the case of disadvantaged young people than is assumed in the conventional approach.

There is evidence to support both findings from available research on youth poverty. Thus for example, Aassve et al. (2006, p. 26) note that in Europe, young people's incomes vary widely among and within countries, and through the transitions from childhood the dynamics of young peoples' incomes and living arrangements vary and change considerably. In addition, whether or not young people live with their family can determine whether or not the household unit experiences poverty, especially if they are still studying or earning an income that can (in part) contribute to household income and living standards. Echoing one of our findings, this complexity is intensified when other factors, such as partners and children and shared households are considered.

Related to this is the issue identified by Ridge (2002, 2009) in her in-depth studies of how families cope with poverty and economic adversity, that children and young people often contribute directly and indirectly to the family financially in order to ease the financial pressures that the family is facing. If they were unable to work to contribute money, Ridge found that some children adopted covert strategies to assist by reducing their demand on family resources, by opting out of school trips, and not asking for new clothes, or for money to participate in activities, (Ridge, 2002, p. 37). This is consistent with the findings of a later study (Ridge, 2007, p.45), which found that many older children and young people took on more self-responsibility with regards to their routines and schedules and thus acted as independent agent to ease financial and other pressures on their family (see also Roker, 1998).

The issue here is that if children and young people adjust their behaviour in order to either supplement family income or reduce their demands on the family budget, how can such behaviour be captured in poverty studies? Young people's contributions to the family finances are often treated as an intra-household transfer rather than a supplement to income, while any action they take to reduce the spending that would otherwise occur (e.g. by choosing not to go on school trips or participate in voluntary school activities) will not be captured in the conventional (income-based) calculations that determine whether the family is above or below the poverty line.[10]

Even more problematic than the difficulties involved in estimating the incomes of households containing children and young people is the definition of the household itself. One of the features to emerge from the youth poverty literature is its highly dynamic nature (Moore, 2005). As will become clear, many of our interviewees had complex, often haphazard and unstable relationships with other household members.

Even if they were close to both biological parents, many of the young people who we interviewed for *Making a Difference* lived with only one of them and maintained contact with the other, and also with other members of their extended families. Many of these families were large and close-knit, with older siblings and distant relatives moving in and out, making it difficult to identify 'the' structure of the household at any point in time. But without a fixed 'structure', it becomes difficult to calculate adjustments that allow for differences in family need (through the equivalence sale) that is a key step in identifying poverty status using the conventional (income-based) approach.

These factors suggest that conventional poverty studies are not capable of providing accurate estimates of the extent of poverty in the kinds of households that are the focus of interest in this study. This does not mean that one should abandon such studies altogether, since they provide a valuable guide, especially with respect to trends in poverty. However, there is now

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[10] Such behavior would be better captured in studies that use expenditure as opposed to income as the basis for estimating poverty, but most poverty studies are income-based. It is also worth observing that this kind of behaviour also casts doubt on the equal resource-pooling assumption that is made when estimating poverty using income.

widespread acknowledgment that conventional poverty studies are best thought of as generating estimates of the poverty *risks* facing different households rather than the actual poverty rates that they experience.

4.3. Information on Economic Disadvantage among the *Making a Difference* Sample

As Chapter 3 explains in more detail, sampling for *Making a Difference* was carried out in order to obtain a sample of economically disadvantaged young people aged 11 to 17 years. While sampling focused on particular suburbs in three capital cities, in most sites organisations such as Mission Australia and The Smith Family brokered access to young people through services that they offered to young people in these localities. In large part therefore, the *Making a Difference* sample was made up of young people who formed the client group for services offered by these organisations.

A normal requirement of these organisations for access to these services was that the young person's family (or the young person him/herself) fulfilled a 'low income' criterion, such as having a Health Care Card, receiving an Educational Maintenance Allowance (in Victoria) or having a School Card (in South Australia). In some sites, we not only interviewed young people who were direct users of services provided by these organisations, but also friends or acquaintances who happened to be present, or who expressed an interest in being interviewed.

In one site, we accessed young people directly through a school. In this case, we had no means of screening them for evidence of low income, and we therefore carried out several interviews (3) with young people who were in (what we came to know in the course of the interviews) was middling socio-economic circumstances. The stories of participants who were clearly reasonably well-off have proved to be a useful counterpoint for the stories of those on low incomes and are only used in this report to provide a counterpoint, they are not (with the exception of Vanessa's case) used when patterns in the data are discussed.

Whether the majority of the young people who we interviewed for *Making a Difference* were economically disadvantaged can be seen from information that we asked them to provide on a survey form at the commencement of personal interviews (see Chapter 3 and Appendix A). Eighty young people (out of a total of 96 who we talked to) completed these survey forms, sometimes with our help, sometimes on their own. Many did not complete the forms fully. Nonetheless, all indicated either their family's housing tenure (public, private rented, or owner occupied), *or* their family's main source of income (earnings or government payments), *or* their postcode, from which it was possible to derive a Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) code for the suburb where they lived (details are provided later)..

Of the eighty who completed the form, 47 (or almost six in ten) indicated that they fell into one of these three categories. Of the 71 young people who gave their postcode, almost half fell into the lowest decile of the SEIFA distribution for disadvantage. Four in ten reported living in publicly provided housing. Over half reported that their family relied on welfare payments, although some of the young people who we talked to clearly didn't come from an economically disadvantaged background (for example, see the story of Vanessa described

later). It is fair to say, however, that most did, and it is their stories that we focus on in this chapter and throughout this report.

4.4. Living Arrangements and Money Flows

The living arrangements of young people can play a role in both explaining their social and economic circumstances, and the events that led to their current situation. Living arrangements can serve to protect young people from the effects of economic adversity, but can also exacerbate their poverty and exclusion. Many of the parents of the young people who were interviewed were separated, but their former partners lived close by and often had strong on-going relationships with their children, who also formed new relationships with step-mums or step-dads and with their children.

A further layer of complexity arose for those young people from ethnic backgrounds where large extended families were the norm, with aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers, grown-up siblings and their partners also part of a large and sometimes rapidly-changing family network of relationships. Patterns in these social networks are detailed and discussed in Chapter 7.

Even though we asked young people at the start of interview who they lived with, it was difficult to get a complete picture of their living arrangements, which often emerged some way into the interviews, as they talked about their home lives and what they did and didn't like about them. Many young people's household circumstances were subject to constant change. Some moved home frequently.

We asked young people to represent their living arrangements and immediate relationships on a blank sheet of paper. Figure 4.1 provides one example of a complex network of close relationships that spanned multiple dwellings. The following extract from the interview took place when discussing the diagram and illustrates how difficult it was to gain a clear picture of household circumstances without spending an inordinate amount of time that would have detracted from other issues.

Figure 4-1: Jessica's Diagram of her Living Arrangements
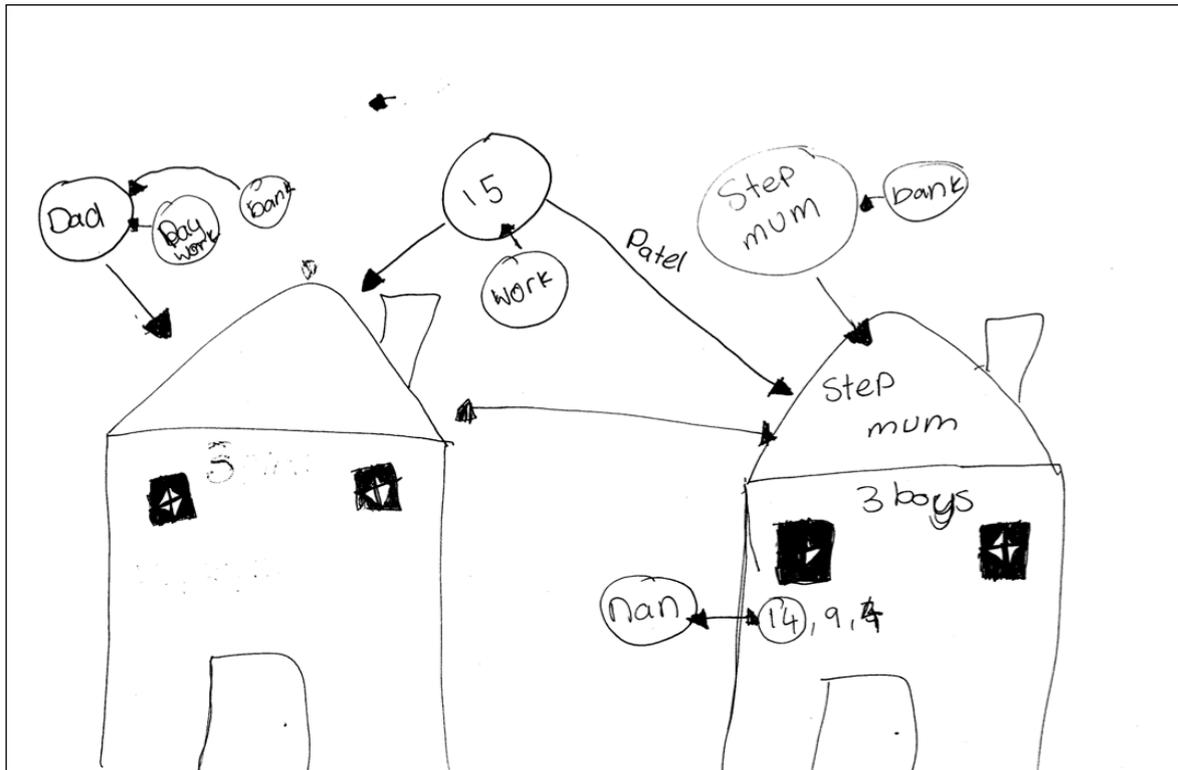
Jessica: *Yeah I got like two [households].*

Interviewer**:** Two households OK. So you have two households and how
          do you, so how do you kind of split the time? ...Do you spend
          time like half, half or ...?

Jessica: *I normally spend time with my dad at my dad's house. And
          like sometimes like around Christmas or birthdays I
          sometimes go with my stepmum's.*

Interviewer: OK so you spend most of your time at your dad's house?

Jessica: *Yeah.*
          [...later in the interview]

Interviewer: Yeah so in that household [points at household] who lives in
          that household like how many people? So you don't have to
          write their names you might write you know two brothers or
          one sister or whoever, including yourself. So how many, you
          don't have to write their names. So there's five girls living in
          your household. And what are their age range like what's the
          youngest?

Jessica: It was five at one stage.

Interviewer: OK so at the moment there's three?

Jessica: *Yeah.*

Interviewer**:** So three girls.

Jessica: *17, 15 and ...*
Interviewer: 13. OK so just the four of you at that household?
Jessica: *Yeah.*
Interviewer: OK and what about this household over here? So this is your other household and that's with your stepmum?
Jessica: *Yeah.*
               [...later again]
Interviewer: And what about like grandparents? Is there any way that they help like do they help?
Jessica*:*   *They sometimes help Tony's oldest boy, my stepmum with like camps and all that...so his Nan helps him.*

The exchange highlights the challenges that faced us in efforts to get a complete picture of what is a complex but constantly evolving situation that contrasts starkly with the 'fixed and finite' household that forms the basis of conventional poverty studies. Later on in the same interview, it became clear that the three older girls contributed to the family finances in various ways. This made it difficult to obtain a picture of the overall financial circumstances of the household (and hence the degree of economic adversity experienced by its members).

Given that the focus of the interviews was on the experience of adversity, issues surrounding household arrangements normally arose in the context of discussing household finances and whether or not they were sufficient to meet household needs. This often lead into a discussion about the sources of income (both regular and in times of specific need) and that in turn revealed information about the sources of these transfers and their relation to the young person being interviewed and their immediate family.

What emerged was again a complex picture in which income flows were often intermittent rather than regular:

Interviewer: Tell me about money in your house – do you get your own money?
Tanesha: *Nah. If I find something, I'll get it. Like in the shop, if I find 5c I'll pick it up, and I'll keep it, unless I see someone drop it, I'll give it to them. And then...from what I've found, I keep all my money, I save it. So that anything bad happens, if Mum can't pay a bill, I'll give it to her to pay it off.*
Interviewer: So do you ever not ask your mum for things, 'cos you know she hasn't got enough money.
Tanesha*:*   *I never ask mum for anything. I get my own stuff...*
Interviewer: And is your mum struggling to pay the mortgage and stuff like that?
Tanesha: *Yeah.*
Interviewer: Does she get extra help from anywhere else? Have you got grandparents or aunts and uncles?

> Tanesha: *Yeah, we have my nan and pop, and they always offer, but mum never takes it. 'Cos she doesn't want to be greedy or anything. Like we get the child support, but sometimes we don't, and then it's really hard, 'cos then she can't get it.*

There were several examples like this of young people reporting often highly irregular or unpredictable income flows from outside the household. These irregular flows clearly had an impact on young people's lives. Without them, the young people often did without. Yet the lack of certainty around these flows made it difficult for young people and their families to plan, for example to commit to regular payments for resources that improved their standard of living, or for extra-curricular activities.

Remittances

Many of the families in this study had complex family networks that extended beyond the household itself. This meant that while some of the households appeared to have reasonable income in-flows; often the money flowed straight out again. Remittances were particularly common for first- and second-generation migrant families. There is sometimes an implicit contract underpinning one person's migration to a rich country, as Sana and Massey (2005) suggest. Thus, one family member might be sent to work in another country as an investment that is recovered by the family in the home country when remittances start to arrive.

Huong (male, 14 years, NSW) lived with his father who worked two jobs and long hours so that he could support their household but also his partner and other children living in a South-East Asian country. Money flowed in and out of their household, but Huong had no money (or time) for recreational pursuits. Other young people recently arrived in Australia reported similar flows of money to their home countries, either from employment income, or from government payments.

Itzigsohn (1995) argues that these types of overseas remittances are common in countries where there are limited jobs and that for those receiving the remittances the stress associated with their poverty is reduced. However, given that Huong's father was working two jobs and long hours this would suggest that remittances have the potential to increase pressures on those having to provide for more than one household. The stress of working two jobs also impacted on Huong who took on the majority of domestic activities and rarely saw his father, except for late in the evenings.

4.5. Doing it Tough

Even though most of the young people gave information (their housing tenure, for example) that suggested that they were living in economic disadvantage, most also said that they had most of what they needed or could get it from relatives. However, these young people tended to profess very modest needs. They did not have the "easy confidence" that Sen (1987) has noted among those born to a life of privilege. Indeed, further discussion sometimes revealed a severe level of deprivation, with some young people expressing a deep-seated sense of

anxiety and resentment about things that they were missing out on. For example, one young person when asked what he was missing out on replied:

> *Sometimes if I just want to go late night for shopping maybe just for the boys maybe just chilling out with the boys, it seems like everyone else gets to go but me. And you know bus fare there and back that's only about $3 just maybe $3, $2 that's it, not that much for bus fare. You know, just a little bit of money just for that.*

Another example illustrates how unanticipated expenses can make the difference between bare survival and dependency on others:

> *It can be tough at times. I remember one stage when the stock market went down or something like that, we were really struggling. Because my step-mum got a bit sick and she's just had this operation, she's had her teeth taken out or something like that, and she needs to get these things put in, these dentures, and it will cost her $25,000. That's the money we don't have. But we have this… her cousin who's a dentist, and he's managed to give us a big discount ... like, help us out a lot. But I remember, sometimes, my step-mum used to cry because of money.*

Some households struggled with daily necessities like food, and some children did not attend school when there was no food:

> *My mum struggles, she gets paid on Thursdays but struggles on the Wednesday. Me and my brother if there is no food for school, we don't go to school at all. She has never sent us to school with no food* (Billie, female, 15 years, NSW).

One young person (his interview is also discussed in Chapter 3) was 'finding it hard'. He was not in education, training or employment or in receipt of any government benefit.

Interviewer:	Do you ever not ask [for bus fare] because you are worried that your family doesn't have enough?
Linox:	*Yes. A lot of my family use it more than I do. I don't need….*
Interviewer:	What kinds of things do you miss out on?
Linox:	*Like say if I wanted, like stuff, shoes and that. Like this week I really needed, but parents just say they can't, but yes, those kinds of things.*

Several young people clearly wanted to do more, but were missing out because their families couldn't afford it:

Max*:*	*Oh I wouldn't mind playing cricket.*
Interviewer:	Cricket? What would stop you, is there a club around here?
Max:	*Yes there is but…. I can't get in, too many people or something, I don't know. I heard that it's full.*
Interviewer:	I imagine it would be pretty popular. Does it, do you think it costs a lot to play something like cricket?
Max:	*Yes, something like $200 a year, $250, something like that.*

Interviewer: That is quite a bit. And would you be able to get the money for that, would your dad be able to get the money for that, if you wanted to play?

Max: *No, he wouldn't. I would have to somehow make a deal with the club, like I don't get a trophy at the end of the year so it saves a couple of bucks, I don't know. Somehow we would make a deal! Get it cheaper.*

A common response to this hardship was for young people to deny that they really wanted what they could not afford. Bob (female, age 17 years, Victoria) had indicated earlier in the interview that she had been one of the few young people to miss out on school camp because her mother couldn't afford the cost.

Interviewer: Was there any time that you felt that you couldn't go on for one reason or another, that you wanted to go on but you couldn't?
Bob: Not that I can remember, I mean I didn't go to [school camp] but I didn't really want to go because I didn't like all the kids in my class and stuff.

As discussed in Chapter 2, adapted preference (the tendency to deny that one wants things that one would really like, and that others consider customary) is a common response to economic disadvantage, and also a means that young people use to protect both themselves from the pain of missing out, and their parents from the anguish of having to say 'no'.

4.6. Strategies for Conserving and Increasing Income

Engaging in economic activities is important for low-income families who often experience financial shortfalls which reduce young people's opportunities for full participation in school and neighbourhood environments. Young people in the *Making a Difference* study were engaged in an array of economic activities which included generating, spending and saving income as well as enabling others to generate income. Young people had to manage the competing economic demands of family, school and peer cultures. As a result they mobilised their resources in a variety of creative ways. This section focuses on the economic activities young people were involved in and some of the strategies that they used to maximise their resources. However, it begins with a discussion of the complex distribution networks of families.

Conserving income

As Ridge (2002) and van der Hoek (2005) show, one response of young people to economic hardship is to conserve income where they can in order to increase their chances of participating in at least some desirable activities. Like the young people interviewed by Ridge and van der Hoek, young people in the current study had two strategies for conserving income, the first being to save what income they could and the second being to 'go without'. Most young people spoke about saving money where they could:

> *I have a savings card which like I put $10 in each month and I spent $199 on a phone but I'm saving now, I don't really spend it (Kylie, female, 12 years, Vic).*

> *I'm saving for....I think, yeah, I'm saving for college, and stuff...high school and stuff (Manu, female, 11 years, Vic).*

Where young people said that they were saving, they were often saving for a particular item. Not many young people said that they had a bank account, and saving usually involved putting money in jars. Indeed, there seemed to be a lack of awareness about banks and their services. Riley saved her money in a '*big jar*':

> *Well, when I work I save up my money, I have a big jar I have saved up like $200 (Riley, female, 14 years, NSW).*

Often parents encouraged the saving of money by not allowing young people to spend their money on certain things. For example, Robert spoke about how his mother limited his spending and therefore forcing him to save:

> *Usually I have to save up because I'm not allowed to spend it on lollies or anything (Robert, male, 13 years, SA).*

The second strategy for conserving income was to 'go without'. However, this had implications for the young person in terms of their participation opportunities. Young people who went without often excluded themselves from activities with their peers as a result. However, 'going without' was not always a voluntary activity. Rose stopped asking for things because of the response from her parents. She accepted that her parents could not afford many things and in not asking she conserved income:

> Researcher: OK so when you were little you used to ask for lots of things and what changed why?

> Rose: *I think all the yelling that we got threw me. So I got it* (Rose, female, 12 years, NSW.

Tessa said about her parents not having enough money:

> *I wouldn't want to ask because I feel sorry for them* (Tessa, female, 15 years, NSW)

Billie said that her mother's money conservation strategies impacted on her relationships with her friends:

> *My mum doesn't like having [my friend] over when there isn't much food; she gets ashamed like she is going to go tell her mum. In case she says we didn't have much for dinner tonight* (Billie, female, 14 years, NSW)

There were many examples of instances like this, where young people just went without to conserve the household income.

Pocket money

Around a quarter of young people who we spoke to said that they received pocket money from their parents or other family members. Pocket money was often irregular and varied in the amount received. In many households, pocket money at any given time was dependent on

the amount of income coming into the household. Some young people, like Tahlia recognised that her mother just could not afford to pay her pocket money and she relied on hand me downs from her siblings:

> *Yes. My mum doesn't really have money because of the bills and stuff but my sister has a job and gets money so when she gets clothes I get the other clothes but occasionally I get a couple of pieces of clothing that are on special, it is pretty hard but I get used to it. If people had to live on what we have to live on they wouldn't know what hit them* (Tahlia, female, 14 years, NSW)

For most of the quarter of the young people who got pocket money, it was linked to their domestic contributions. Domestic contributions included general cleaning, cooking, taking out the rubbish, looking after family pets and caring for siblings. For a couple of young people, rather than receiving a set amount each week they received an amount per chore completed. This meant that their income at the end of the week was variable and dependent on their household contributions for the week.

In a couple of cases, pocket money was also linked to other domains including school and sports. For example, Laura, a parent from South Australia gave her daughter pocket money for completing her domestic chores and then an additional amount if she was well-behaved and attended school. Additional pocket money was also used to reward young people for performing well in sport. For example, Kylie talked about receiving an extra $5 per goal that she scored at soccer.

For many young people, pocket money was their only source of income. Most realised that it was in their best interest to complete domestic chores so that they had some of their own money that they could spend independently. In several cases, pocket money allowed the young people to participate more fully in peer, school and neighbourhood community activities. There were examples of young people using their money to attend school excursions, participate in local sports and peer activities like going to the movies and to the shops.

However, it is important to emphasise that three in four of the young people we talked to indicated that they rarely, if ever, got pocket money. Many of these young people also did domestic chores without receiving payment from their parents. Many of these young people saw these contributions as being part of a household. This was something that they '*just had to do'*.

Employment

Young people saw employment as a way in which to generate their own income (and contribute to household income) as well as increase their opportunities to participate in peer, school and neighbourhood activities. The majority of young people of employable age were interested in or currently looking for employment. However, only about a tenth of the young people we talked to were actually in formal employment. Of those that were employed, the majority worked in fast-food outlets. Generally, those in employment earned between $50 and $100 a week.

Young people were often brokered into employment through family or school. For example, Rig Master (a sixteen year old girl we interviewed in school) was able to enter employment because her brother already had a job working at the local fast food outlet. This enabled her to meet the boss who then offered her a job as well:

> *I got a job at KFC, 'cos my brother got offered the job while we were at karate, and 'cos my brother turned 15, he's like [the boss], 'Oh, I'm the boss at KFC. Come and I'll give you a job'. And then, I turned 15, and the manager told my brother to tell me to come for an interview, and I'll have the job* (Rig Master, female, 16 years, Victoria)

Another example was Aasim (male, 14 years, NSW) who worked for his uncle fixing machinery. This allowed Aasim to earn an income and gain work experience that had the potential to impact on his future employment aspirations.

Schools also brokered young people into employment, mainly through work experience programs. These types of programs enabled young people to gain employment experience and also meet people with the capacity to employ them in the future. For some, however, generating income through employment competed with the demands of school and they had to make a choice about which was more important to them.

Tessa worked in a local fast food outlet; however the hours that she was offered were late and made her tired for school the next day:

> *But I quit because when I worked late I go to school and I'm just tired and I can't cope properly so I just quit. When I finish school then I could* (Tessa, female, 15 years, NSW)

She saw the benefit of completing her schooling before finding a job. However, she had to forego the money that she would have got through employment that would have allowed her to engage in extra school and neighbourhood activities as well as contribute to her household's income.

Some young people appeared to have a good knowledge of the workings of the labour market, and the steps they needed to take to get a job. This was especially true of young people who had family members in paid employment. However, young people living in jobless families often appeared to have little idea about work requirements. As Chapter 5 discusses in more detail, young people with no informal connections to the labour market tended to cite formal structures as their means to employment, but again, often displayed little idea as to how best to use them.

Government benefits

Many of the young people talked about their own, or their families' receipt of government benefits. Benefits were distributed differently across households. Where young people received a government payment directly, some received it all themselves, while others had their money redistributed to or by the household. For example, Chad Hugo (male, 17 years, SA) received $200 a fortnight in Youth Allowance, and gave his mum $100 of that. Fellowes

(male, 16 years, Vic) received the Youth Allowance (other) and lived with his grandparent. He gave all of the money to his grandparent because they looked after him.[11] He only occasionally asked for money back from these payments *'$20, $30 here and there but that's rare'.*

An interesting finding was that many of the young people in the study were not aware of the changes to Youth Allowance eligibility that occurred in 2009, while we were carrying out fieldwork. Many of the young people did not realise that they would not be entitled to this benefit if they were not working or participating in study or training.

A couple of young people also mentioned the money that their family received from the government as part of the Economic Stimulus Package in late 2008 and early 2009. Most of those who mentioned this payment were from New South Wales and talked about it as being a large amount of money for their household. For example, Aasim talked about his mum receiving 'a lot' of money:

> *No she gets a lot. She gets paid a lot, now I've heard about the government giving us a thousand bucks* (Aasim, male, 14 years, NSW)

Johnny responded similarly, saying that his mum got 'heaps' of money because she got these payments for his siblings as well:

> *Yeah, she had heaps. 'Cos she got it for my little brothers...'cos she gave it to me. I didn't even know I had it. She just gave it to me* (Johnny, male, 17 years, NSW)

Enabling others to generate income

As mentioned above, many young people contributed to the household in terms of domestic labour. For many households, these contributions were essential for family functioning and allowing others to generate income. Ridge (2009) argues that in many cases, when a parent returns to work it can put considerable strain on their children. This was the case with Joe (male, 15 years, Victoria) who cared for his sister who had a disability. Both of his parents spent most of the week in employment (and in education in his mother's case). His father worked 6 days a week and his mother worked 5 days a week and studied each evening at the local technical college.

Joe was responsible for getting his sister ready for school each day, for picking her up after school, and for caring for her each afternoon until his parents got home. Without Joe's contribution, his parents would not have been able to work and generate a household income. However, Joe himself was not able to find employment or participate in many school and neighbourhood activities because he did not have the time, regardless of whether his family could afford the costs.

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[11] A benefit received by a young person who has been assessed as being independent of parents for the purposes of the allowance.

Another example (discussed earlier) was Huong (male, 14 years, NSW). Huong's father worked two jobs for long hours. Huong did most of the domestic chores including cleaning and cooking. Without these contributions his father would not be able to work the long hours that he did. However, Huong's opportunities to develop friendships out of school and participate in activities were limited first because he was time poor, and second because most of the money that flowed into his household flowed out in the form of remittances.

4.7. Summary Comments

It is now generally accepted that measuring poverty is a difficult exercise, and that conventional measures of income poverty can at best serve as rough approximations of the amount of economic adversity being experienced in a given community. We have attempted to show in this chapter that the accurate measurement of economic hardship among young people is as hard as (or even harder than) it is among the general population. The young people we talked to for *Making a Difference* lived in a variety of household configurations, where sharing sometimes appeared to be complete, but sometimes also appeared more partial. These household configurations, moreover, often had a somewhat temporary nature – people (often one parent or another, often a sibling, a sibling's partner, or another relative) came and went.

As the example of Jessica's two households shows, it was often difficult to get a sense of a 'permanent' household configuration for which a standard of living could be estimated. This is not just a random issue, but one that is inextricably bound up with economic adversity. Poorer people tend to experience more separations (and re-partnering), and move homes more often than people who are economically better off. As the discussion in Chapters 8 and 10 show, the young people we talked to often found it difficult to remain focused on their education when they were frequently moving suburbs and schools.

We have also attempted to show how young people in the *Making a Difference* sample often had to make do with very little, going without the recreational activities that other young people considered normal, and in some cases, going without food too. In this context, it is interesting to note the awareness that several young people showed of the Economic Stimulus Package lump-sum payments that were flowing to households while we were carrying out fieldwork for *Making a Difference*. It seems that in this (limited and brief) example, public policy did make a real difference to some young people's lives. This issue is further explored in Patulny et al. (2012).

Finally we have discussed young people's responses to economic adversity. Here we get to the heart of debates, not only about social exclusion, but also about young people as agents who construct their own lives. In common with Ridge (2002) and others, we found that young people experiencing economic adversity respond by conserving their income, by saving their pocket money (if they get any), by seeking employment (if they can find it) and by supporting their parents so that they can hold onto their jobs.

These responses often come at a price that young people clearly recognise – foregoing social participation or even education, for example. Other chapters of this report outline more fully

the price that young people pay for their economic disadvantage, in terms of living in households with no economic buffers, under-resourced neighbourhoods, compromised safety, poor schooling, and problematic transitions to the world of work.

This chapter has focused on how the young people we interviewed experienced economic adversity. The remainder of the report unpacks the factors that affect how that adversity impacts on other aspects of young people's lives, giving attention to the key determinants of their lives as they themselves see and experience them.

Chapter 5 addresses the general issue of locational disadvantage, drawing attention to the important role that neighbourhood (immediate and surrounding) plays in influencing patterns of opportunity and participation. Chapter 6 looks and other aspects of the environmental contexts that shape the lives of young people: home, leisure and learning. Chapter 7 focuses on the role of different types of social networks, and how these promote (or impede) a sense of belonging and obligation.

Chapter 8 explores issues associated with economic exclusion and how it affects educational disadvantage, while Chapter 9 focuses on the impact of school and the learning environment. Chapter 10 considers the important pathways into and out of participation in education and work by considering out of school and return to school experiences. Finally, Chapter 11 draws together the main conclusions of the study and explores the policy implications of main findings.

5. Locational Disadvantage

5.1. Introduction

As discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, the study sites for *Making a Difference* were in outer metropolitan and middle ring suburbs. Outer ring suburbs are typically poorly serviced in terms of transport, public services and infrastructure, but it was apparent from young people's stories that in spite of being on low incomes, they had quite different levels of access to resources.

This chapter uses three key concepts to consider how young people's experiences of economic adversity were affected by their location. These concepts are opportunity structures, opportunity contexts and participation milieus. In this and subsequent chapters, pseudonyms are used for all place names where participants use them directly.

Our concern with locational differences in experiences of economic adversity stems from early analysis of the data which revealed that not only did some young people who participated in the study have constrained perspectives of the participation opportunities available to them (which might be expected), and that these perspectives of what was available were strongly shared by others in their community (which also might be expected). However, what was less expected was that other study participants in different locations had much less constrained views of what was available generally and what was available to them specifically.

5.2. The Importance of Opportunity

Young people's knowledge of the opportunities available typically corresponded to the levels of knowledge held by young people in their area and not just to the opportunity structures that were affordable to the individual. This means that it is important to consider not just the structures available in a particular area but also whether and how young people know about these structures. This knowledge is in effect the opportunity context of the young person themselves. The nature of opportunity structures and the conditions that make them visible to economically disadvantaged young people needs to be considered if policy is to deliver services and opportunities to support young people.

Opportunity structures can be thought of as structural resources which support young people's participation. They include schools, youth and sporting clubs, employment services, theatres and cinemas, targeted services and transport infrastructure (which can take people to structures in neighbouring or distant locations). Two young people on comparable incomes may live in different areas with quite different structural resources – one may have access to several different schools, to a nearby TAFE, to organised sporting facilities, and to the sorts of businesses that employ many young people - while the other may live in an area where there is one school, poor transport and very little else.

There is a substantial literature on opportunity structures that explores the interaction between the different resources that permit civic and economic participation in society. The notion of opportunity structures is derived partly from Polyanyi's work on the resources that are

necessary for integration or full participation in society (Murie and Musterd, 2004, p. 1445). In this work, opportunity structures refer to the resources that exist: in the sphere of the market, through labour market participation opportunities; in the sphere of state, through benefits and redistribution (safety-nets and other state-provided resources); and in the sphere of mutual support opportunities, through social networks that might be available to and permit the integration of citizens.

Opportunity structures, or modes of integration, are attached to various spatial scales. City and urban regions are the most relevant spatial scales for the functioning of labour markets and thus for labour market participation opportunities. In contrast, the opportunity structures for young people aged between 11 and 17 years may well function on more localised scales.

The concept of opportunity structures has been applied in the past to the study of young people's life chances in two key ways. First, Roberts (2009) has applied the concept to longitudinal data on youth attainment to understand the persistence of the relationship between social class and educational achievement in youth transitions. He uses this work to critique the assumption among policymakers in the UK that some groups and individuals suffer from a 'poverty of aspiration' and that this explains poor outcomes. Roberts instead contends that public policy fails to deliver adequate opportunity structures to disadvantaged young people. Some argue that the assumption of a poverty of aspiration also underpins Australian educational policy (Gale et al., 2010; Sellar and Gale, 2009).

This critique is supported by a review by Kintrea (2009) that asserts policies based on raising aspirations as a way of improving outcomes are often based on deficit views of low-income families. Here, policy reinforces middle class values and domains of achievement in its definitions of 'high' aspirations (elevating academic goals rather than technical and manual work goals). Kintrea (2009) cites substantial evidence that low-income parents often hold generalised rather than specific aspirations for their children – wanting them to do better than they have; they may focus for example, on school completion.

These aspirations are tempered with expectations shaped by family experiences. It is not necessarily the desires for upward mobility that differs between low-income and high-income families but rather it is expectations, a sense of self-efficacy, and the expectations of others that constitute barriers to achievement. Indeed, Robert's longitudinal work shows how many decades of evidence illustrate the working class to be more ambitious than the middle class *relative to the starting points* of the different socio-economic groups. He argues that disengagement from formal education is not associated with a 'poverty of aspiration' but is a rational act in the face of a 'poverty of opportunity'.

In terms of current policy initiatives, Roberts argues in a later paper that the minority of young people who fail to secure qualifications and jobs do so because the current suite of opportunity structures in place to support these transitions - training and vocational programmes -'share the same design faults' as their policy and program predecessors (Roberts and Atherton, 2011). These design faults have created 'blind alleys' of training programs that fail to motivate or secure jobs that young people consider worthwhile.

A plethora of youth transition programs and initiatives is also apparent in the Australian education landscape. This complex of policy initiatives has been described as 'a minefield for young people, their parents, educators, industry and policy makers themselves' (Australian Industry Group and Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2007, p. 21) and as a 'bewildering array of projects ... that have led to confusion and inefficiency' (te Riele, 2007).

While there are some critiques of these structural issues, there has been little attention in this and other research paid to the learning opportunities that build the navigation skills young people need to move into work. Transition research and policy initiatives has tended to focus on opportunity structures aimed directly at young people 15 years and older, and ignores the earlier stages where a sense of efficacy and skills are built. It is in these earlier years that the foundations are laid that enable young people to make use of opportunity structures as they start to move beyond formal schooling.

This focus of how well opportunity structures are distributed and are working is complemented by a second field of research that illuminates the importance of access to opportunity structures from a younger age (middle childhood). This work traces the benefits of laying down skills early and highlights some of the complexities around why some families take up opportunities for their children at an early age and others do not.

Longitudinal ethnographic studies with groups of families with different economic and educational resources have shown that some young people accumulate early the skills and knowledge to navigate the 'alleyways' of educational options long before they come into contact with the pathways that explicitly support labour market entry (Laureau, 2003, McLeod and Yates, 2006). These young people come from families where knowledge circulates about the antecedents of attainment and employment and they tend to mix with children from other families who are groomed from an early age to succeed in a performance-oriented employment culture which valorises individual attainment.

This work powerfully illustrates that middle class families actively seek out opportunity structures (often performance-oriented adult-organised out of school activities) where their children can participate, develop skills and socialise broadly so that they accumulate educational and employment capital from a young age (often beginning in the early childhood years through the middle years). In this, young people develop and become used to forming bridging capital through these activities with others. Bridging social capital refers to the building of connections between heterogeneous groups; these are likely to be more fragile, but more likely also to foster social inclusion. (Schuller, Baron, and Field, 2000).

Bridging capital requires opportunities that allow young people to form social connections with communities beyond their families and immediate neighbourhood peers. In contrast, families on lower incomes tend to be more strongly focussed on their children's participation in activities that develop independence and autonomy from adults and institutions, as well as a sense of belonging and loyalty to local networks. This is in part a necessity because of income constraints, but can also be a value orientation. The unstructured activities that are common in low-income communities maintain and build the group orientation (bonding

capital) which can buffer people on low incomes from adversity in times of hardship[12]. These collective orientations towards certain childrearing practices (at either a family or a neighbourhood level) form the participation milieus of young people.

Importantly, these studies have found that typical schooling practices assume that young people will come with capital gained through the out of school experiences that are associated with middle class childrearing practices. Teachers recognise the skills gained in out of school performance related activities because they are closest to those that traditionally underpin school curriculum and perhaps closest to those gained in their own childhoods. Children who come without these skills may therefore be disadvantaged in schooling pedagogies that assume these skills are developed in the home. Furthermore, it is now well established that there is a positive relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and educational outcomes (OECD 2001; Fullarton 2002; Edwards 2004; Halpern 2005; Khoo and Ainley 2005; Semo and Karmel, 2011).

In sum, the activities that support young people to navigate educational institutions and employment pathways most effectively within the current education paradigm are those that broadly educate, that permit socially expansive forms of social interaction, that bridge the familiar and the unfamiliar, and that extend young people's awareness and experiences. As such they are critical learning experiences where young people accumulate and activate important forms of social and educational capital.

The notion of a participation milieu is an important analytical lens for understanding young people's account of their participation and for understanding the tensions in young people's lives between managing their immediate circumstances and their future trajectories. While it is possible to identify the participation orientations that best support young people into work within the current schooling/employment structures, it is equally important to recognise what is gained through participation in informal unstructured activities and the role these skills play in supporting young people to cope with economic adversity.

Recognising that these milieus bring strengths to immediate contexts of hardship, however, does not mean that families on low incomes do not want their children to have opportunities that can better support them to succeed in education and employment. It is important to consider how young people may remain bonded to their communities and bridge out to others and gain skills to help them navigate educational transitions and employment successfully.

Finally and perhaps most critically, this leads us to the question of how effectively opportunity structures that build the navigation skills young people require to move into work interact with different participation milieus - particularly with the participation milieus of young people most in need of opportunities to ensure educational success and broaden their horizons and skill bases.

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[12] The importance of these buffers is explored further in Chapter 7.

To consider how the experience of economic adversity impacts on young people's participation in activities that build the skills discussed above we have analysed our data with respect to the way young people themselves see their opportunities in late childhood/early adolescence. These analytic concerns required a spatial understanding of where young people see their opportunities located. Within the overarching shared experience of economic adversity, however, there were clearly different spatial scales that framed the opportunities the study participants knew about, were interested in and felt were accessible to them. Social policy that aims to ameliorate disadvantage in their lives therefore needs to be attentive not only to what structures are nearby but also to the factors that affect how young people perceive those structures.

Policy initiatives need to be responsive to young people's opportunity contexts. The efficacy of the opportunity structures available to young people need to be evaluated in their relation to the social location and local dynamics which determine how these structures are used and who by. The make-up of a young person's opportunity context will be affected by their access to transport, the local dynamics of social inclusion or exclusion and the values and habits of participation that operate within the young person's social networks. Two young people in areas with similar structural opportunities may experience quite different social dynamics, in one area services and service users may be welcoming, while in another social exclusion may be actively played out. While young people's participation in activities will also be affected by their participation milieu, structures and interventions can be shaped to maximise the participation of those who would most benefit from it.

The patterns in our data suggest that young people on constrained incomes in areas where there was some socio-economic mix were likely to know about the opportunity structures available in and beyond their own area. They had larger and richer opportunity contexts relative to other study participants on similar incomes. They considered using services and facilities in neighbouring suburbs particularly if these services were available at no or low cost. In contrast, young people on similarly constrained incomes in pockets of concentrated or deep disadvantage had more tightly bounded knowledge, often limited to their own (postcode) area and if they did know about external opportunities they were more likely to see these as inaccessible to them. They thus had smaller opportunity contexts than other study participants.

A third set of young people who also lived in deep, concentrated disadvantage were more like the first group in that they had expansive perception of their neighbourhoods, and were able to take advantage of facilities and infrastructure in other suburbs besides their own. They had larger, but not necessarily richer, opportunity contexts. These differences in the way young people perceive the opportunities around them require understanding if the targeting of resources for infrastructure and community development are to be as effective and efficient as possible.

This chapter explores variations in the perception and take-up of resources and opportunities of young people in the study. As it engages the concepts of bridging and bonding capital this

chapter contextualises some of the discussion in Chapter 7 which explores how the effect of families and social networks that attract bonding and bridging capital. Here it is argued that the resource and opportunity contexts of the *Making a Difference* participants were constituted through a fusion of local participation milieus with existing infrastructure and service provision. It follows that in seeking to deliver rich opportunity contexts for young people policy makers need to consider infrastructure and service provision in the light of local participation milieus and the factors that shape these milieus.

These differences have led us to explore the following questions more closely in our data:

- What consistencies are there within specific neighbourhoods in the ways young people perceive the opportunities that are available to them?

- How do these consistencies map across neighbourhoods with similar profiles?

- What effects do different concentrations of disadvantage have on young people's perceptions of the opportunity structures available to them?

- What barriers (other than family financial capacity) prevent young people from taking up opportunities in apparently accessible neighbourhoods?

- What sort of social policies would ensure that economically disadvantaged young people have access to the opportunities available to their better-off counterparts?

Before turning to the data to explore these questions, we provide a brief overview of locational disadvantage in Australia. We describe how we have organised the study sites for *Making a Difference* into different neighbourhood types, and then turn to the data to consider the opportunity structures, contexts and participation milieus that we could identify in these different types of neighbourhoods.

Tracing participation milieus and the social exclusions that produce them in local communities can offer important insights into the question of "who are the agents of exclusion?" As Veit-Wilson (1998) notes, discourses of social exclusion as conducted by policymakers have tended to ignore agency and focus on the excluded to an almost pathological extent rather than on the excluders. Micklewright (2002) lists the key potential actors who exclude young people as: government and its agents; the labour market; schools; parents; other young people; and the young people themselves. This work provides important insights to policy makers and service providers interested in tackling social exclusion and ensuring that young people have access to the opportunity structures that lead to employment and full participation as citizens.

5.3. Locational Disadvantage in Australia

In Australia, as in other rich countries, the relationship between locational disadvantage and educational attainment is an issue of concern to policymakers. More is known in Australia about broad-brush patterns of locational disadvantage and its net effects than about its everyday dynamics. There is a considerable policy focus on locational disadvantage (e.g. the

Australian Government's social inclusion agenda) and on ways of increasing youth attainment (as specified in the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions).

This broad picture of locational disadvantage in Australia indicates that people experiencing income below the poverty live in a variety of regions, both rural and remote and metropolitan areas. Baker and Adhikari (2007) show that, in terms of concentration, about one-fifth of those with incomes below the poverty line live in the most disadvantaged areas as identified by the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD), about half live in areas of moderate disadvantage, and one-third live in areas of below-average disadvantage. The most disadvantaged neighbourhoods - those where one in five people are poor - are often surrounded by areas of moderate rates of poverty (Miranti, McNamara, Tanton, and Harding, 2010; Vu, Harding, Tanton and Vidyattama, 2008).

The analysis of neighbourhood-level disadvantage is particularly important in the Australian context as many metropolitan areas of concentrated disadvantage are spatially isolated by vast tracts of urban sprawl (Baum, 2004; Taylor and Jope, 2001). In a series of studies, Vinson (1999; 2004; 2007) has used a combination of census, survey and administrative data to document the locational or spatial distribution of Australian disadvantage. That work was informed by the view that:

> '..when social disadvantage becomes entrenched within a limited number of localities the restorative potential of standard services in spheres like education and health can diminish. A disabling social climate can develop that is more than the sum of individual and household disadvantages and the prospect is increased of disadvantage being passed from one generation to the next' (Vinson, 2007, p. ix)

When this occurs, general social and economic policies must be supplemented by locality specific interventions if the underlying causes are to be effectively addressed.

Other recent research has used census data to track social exclusion specifically for young people aged 16 years and under. This research has found that young people in rural and remote areas are at greater risk of social exclusion than those in urban areas, but within capital cities, there are also clusters of high risk at the edges of large cities (Harding, McNamara, Daly, and Tanton, 2009). This work also shows that there are considerable state and regional differences in the risks associated with disadvantage. However, it does not attempt to develop an analysis of how typologies of suburbs or neighbourhoods can capture disadvantage as experienced by young people themselves.

5.4. Different Neighbourhood Types

The research design of the *Making a Difference* study adopted an iterative approach to data collection and analysis. This involved moving back and forth between local area statistics produced by the ABS from the 2006 Census, information from local councils and local key informants on services, amenities, facilities, and other resources, and information provided by

young people, parents and service providers on the services and facilities that they saw as significant for them.

Initially, the background statistical and administrative data were collected to support data collection with young people so interviews could be conversational with local reference points. However, as the fieldwork progressed we began to identify important locational differences in young people's experiences of economic adversity that could be mapped onto some of the characteristics of their local neighbourhoods derived from the statistical and administrative data.

In both the fieldwork and the analysis, we adopted a concept of neighborhood that begins with spatial and administrative delineation but takes into account the subjective views, daily practices, local labour and leisure markets and service uses that cross geographic and administrative boundaries (Dietz, 2002). While neighbourhoods affect the everyday lives and outcomes of residents, the process of investigating and analysing neighbourhood experiences is challenging.

First, people's subjective perceptions of neighbourhoods do not necessarily map onto administrative boundaries. Second, one person's sense of neighbourhood does not necessarily align with another's. Third, the spaces and facilities used by individuals within a neighborhood change as their needs change. This last point is particularly relevant to children and young people as they grow up, as recognised by Bronfenbrenner et al. (1986) in their ecological model of child development.

Since the main aim in the *Making a Difference* project is to understand the perspectives of young people, we focused in particular on how young people defined their own neighbourhoods (as distinct from their suburbs) and how this related to their participation habits in out-of-school time, school choices and so on. To this end, we gathered information from young people about their experiences of their neighbourhoods in everyday life and attempted to understand how they saw the limits of 'their neighbourhood' - in other words, the space that they imagined as containing their opportunities.

We found recent research in urban geography helpful in framing how young people spoke about their neighbourhoods. This work has taken what might be considered an ecological approach to neighbourhoods themselves, and has emphasised the importance of the broader spatial context of neighbourhoods (Robson, Lymperopoulou, and Rae, 2008). As Atkinson and Kintrea (2001, p. 2295) argue, 'the context in which the neighbourhood sits is also a very important influence on neighbourhood outcomes'.

Having a view to these broader contexts allowed us to spatially map the key factors to young people's participation: knowledge of what there is to participate in; economic capacity to participate (including the build-up of skills and orientation); and a sense of belonging and welcome in arenas of participation. We could then broadly ask what sort of associations we could make between the opportunity structures for young people in an area, the participation

milieus where they were embedded, and how these two things constituted young people's opportunity contexts.

More specifically, we first analysed our data with respect to young people's individual participation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were typically disjunctures between what young people actually did and what they saw as things they could do. We mapped young people's subjective accounts of their neighbourhoods based on what they saw as available to them rather than on what they actually did regularly. We grouped the study sites where young people's subjective maps described opportunity contexts with similar features.

We then examined postcode-level statistical data for geographical areas that roughly corresponded to key themes in young people's accounts of neighbourhoods. These themes included patterns of mobility, types of family formations, home-ownership patterns, availability of infrastructure (parks, libraries, sporting facilities, welfare service hubs), distance to the nearest metropolitan centre and the availability of public transport to get there. These data were then generalised into a narrative description of neighbourhood types that included key opportunity structures that were typically located within these neighbourhood types.

We overlaid these subjective maps onto the statistical representations of the neighbourhood types. To make these statistical representations we used Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) - summary local area statistics created by the ABS from information collected from households in the 2006 Census - to graphically illustrate these neighbourhood 'types'. The ABS derives four different SEIFAs, each exploring a different aspect of socio-economic conditions in local areas, ranging from Collection Districts with about 225 dwellings, to Local Government Areas, many of which have several thousand inhabitants[13].

In this analysis we use two different indexes. The Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) is derived from indicators including income, educational attainment, employment and unemployment, and household ownership of motor vehicles. The Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) is derived from indicators including the proportion of people with a higher qualification and those employed in a skilled occupation. We examined these SEIFA indexes not only for the geographical suburbs where the young people we talked to lived, but also the indexes for the surrounding neighbourhoods. We did this because young people consistently drew attention to their relationships with young people and key services

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[13] A score for a collector district (CD) is created by adding together the weighted characteristics of that CD, for example, in the case of the Index of Education and Occupation (IEO), the proportion of people with a higher qualification, and those employed in a skilled occupation. Weights given to each indicator are chosen by the ABS. The scores for all CDs are then standardised so that the mean for all Australia equals 1000 and roughly two-thirds of the scores lie between 900 and 1100. This means that approximately 15% of CDs have a score lower than 900, 70% have a score between 900 and 1100, and 15% have a score greater than 1100. In this analysis, SEIFA scores are categorised into ten decile groups, which allow for approximate comparison of suburbs in terms of their relative disadvantage. For more information, see ABS (2008).

in neighbouring suburbs. The Indexes can be represented in deciles providing an effective way of comparing areas quickly. A suburb that is ranked IRSD 1 is in the 10% most disadvantaged suburbs, one that is ranked IRSD 5 is middle range, while one that is ranked IRSD 10 is one of the least disadvantaged suburbs.

We identified a number of consistencies in the ways young people described their experiences. This allowed us to draw some general conclusions about how economically disadvantaged young people experience their neighbourhoods and how their perceptions can influence their engagement with school and other services, their entry into the labour market, and their use of local facilities. This mapping showed that the opportunity contexts of young people in different sites operated on very different scales. Understanding these opportunity contexts and how they are lived in and experienced by young people can provide policy makers with ways to audit service provision that may lead to fuller social inclusion.

This iterative process of examination of statistical data and interaction with young people and other key informants led us to identify four suburb types among the eight suburbs where we carried out our fieldwork. We have named these four as *Low Cost Mortgage Belts, Isolated Pockets, Region of Disadvantage* and *Middle Ring Transit Zone* areas. They are described in greater detail below. Our aim in proposing these suburb types is to generate discussion and further research on neighbourhood typologies that can support explanations of children's and young people's own perceptions of their neighbourhoods, their engagement with school and out of school activities, and their career and other aspirations.

The first three of the four types pertain to outer suburbs on the fringes of Australia's capital cities. These suburbs are geographically isolated and far from the epicentre of the cities, but are likely to be oriented towards (but not necessarily close to) their own metropolitan hub where there are key amenities, including Centrelink offices, major retailers and further education services. The *Middle Ring Transit Zone* on the other hand, is not geographically isolated, and, as the description below shows, often has significant transport, social and economic infrastructure.

Nonetheless, all four neighbourhood types can be characterised as low income.[14] We could not identify any clear patterns in how young people experienced their neighbourhoods in the sample drawn from middle ring suburbs. Not only were the suburbs very different from each other, but the young people living *within* these suburbs used very different infrastructure to each other and often travelled outside to access resources and their social networks. It may well be with a bigger sample size from these areas patterns are evident, but this would need to be the subject of a subsequent study.

Figure 5-1 provides a breakdown of the sample by suburb type.

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[14] It is useful to note in this context that we did not collect data in any inner city areas which (in the Australian context at least) are often very socio-economically mixed and may have had more advantaged than disadvantaged people living within them.

Figure 5-1: Number of participants by location
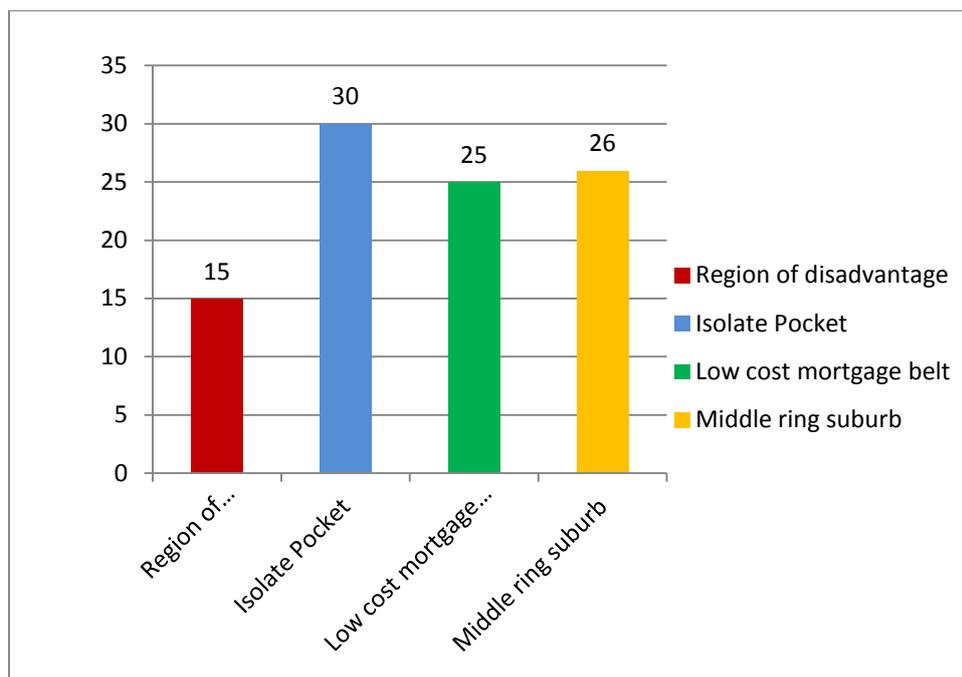
The diagrammatic representations of these suburbs that follow do not depict the relative scale of Low Cost Mortgage Belts, Middle Ring Transit suburbs or Region of Disadvantage suburbs. In terms of land mass, Region of Disadvantage and Isolated Pocket suburbs were between 500 and 550 hectares (with populations of around 6,000 people) , while Middle Ring Transit suburbs were between 1,000 and 1,500 hectares (with populations of around 18,000 people), while Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburbs were larger than 2,000 hectares (with populations of over 16,000 people).

Low Cost Mortgage Belts

Two of the suburbs where we collected data fall into the category that we describe as a *Low Cost Mortgage Belt*. We spoke to twenty-six young people across these suburbs (three were not in low income households). There are other suburbs like these in all capital cities in Australia. These suburbs contained large-scale low-cost housing developments on environmentally 'poor' or reclaimed land on the outer ring of a capital city. Typically these suburbs were developed during the 1990s with a small foyer of relatively large (4 or more bedrooms) houses at one of the entrances to the suburb, with progressively smaller and less expensive houses (2 or 3 bedrooms) located on small blocks of land beyond the foyer. House prices were highly variable and went as low as 28 per cent of the median for the city, and many of the homes were being purchased under buy/rent schemes.

At a first glance at the SEIFA deciles of these suburbs suggest that they are made up of families that are doing quite well, however, there were parts of the suburbs examined where families were clearly doing it tough – and that the focus in the report is on young people belonging to these families. These families doing it tough tend to be living in very

inexpensive private rental properties in the suburb. The suburb type (at SLA levels) comprise approximately 200 ABS census collector districts of approximately 200 households each. Nearly 40 collection districts (~ 9,000 households) were classified in the two most disadvantaged deciles on the SEIFA index. This distribution of low income households among higher income households allowed us to capture the experiences of low income young Australians who live among better off counterparts and to examine how this mix inflects their experiences.

ABS statistics for postcodes show that households in this suburb were primarily families with children, with about one-fifth of households comprising lone parent families. ABS data also reveal consistently high mobility rates for these suburbs, with about a quarter of the population having moved home in the previous five years. About a quarter of the working-age population were not in the labour force, half were employed full-time, a fifth were employed part-time, and about one in twenty were unemployed.

Key occupations include technicians and trades workers, food processing, services and retail. Public transport within and to this neighbourhood appeared to be poor in frequency, and often took long and circuitous routes. However, the suburb did have a number of public amenities, including parks, sports facilities (that were used by local residents), a large shopping centre with a cinema complex, a public library and a swimming pool/fitness centre.

Figure 5.2 provides a visual representation of two SEIFA scores for Low Cost Mortgage Belt 'type'. This has been derived from ABS local area data for two different suburbs with similar statistical characteristics in terms of household structure, employment, population mobility and SEIFA scores.

This suburb scores close to the median in terms of IRSD, but much lower in terms of IEO. Surrounding suburbs appear to be very diverse, ranging from highly disadvantaged (as in the suburb to the east), and reasonably advantaged (as in the suburb to the North). As noted earlier, the socio-economic diversity in the suburb itself is important, that the summary level of disadvantage within the suburb is raised by the pockets of more expensive housing that line the entrances to new developments. Our data was collected from young people from the more disadvantaged households (with the exception of three young people).

Isolated Pocket suburbs

We collected data from twenty-five young people living in two *Isolated Pocket* suburbs. These suburbs are almost exclusively comprised of public housing,

Figure 5-2: SEIFA Indexes for Low Cost Mortgage Belt Suburbs and Surrounds

Note: The grey area shows SEIFA scores in the suburb itself and the white boxes show SEIFA scores in the neighbouring suburbs.

both are among the most disadvantaged in Australia, and both are surrounded by more affluent neighbourhoods. Both suburbs we visited were geographically close to labour markets, but poorly serviced by public transport (e.g. buses passed though every hour at best), meaning that they were to a large extent isolated from regional commercial and employment centres.

Both of the Isolated Pocket suburbs we looked at were built as public housing in the 1960s and 1970s, and were now typically occupied by families with complex problems and intergenerational experience of joblessness. Houses were the dominant dwelling type and were small, with typically 2 or 3 bedrooms, on small blocks of land. Examination of ABS local area data showed that lone parent families made up about half of the population in these suburbs. However, we understand from talking with key informants that both suburbs also contained significant numbers of older childless people with complex needs.

ABS data also showed that a feature of these suburbs was high population mobility, with about four in ten people having moved to these suburbs in the five years to 2006. Finally, ABS data also showed that employment rates were considerably lower than in the Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburb, with about half of all working-age people not in the labour force, one in five unemployed, and only one in five employed full-time. Among this last group, key occupations included labourers, machine operators, and food service and retail workers.

A feature of both Isolated Pocket suburbs examined was their relatively small size (with populations of a few thousand people). Economic disadvantage was fairly homogenous through the suburb. At a Statistical Local Area approximately 55 of 80 collection districts were in the bottom decile on the Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage. Another feature was their lack of infrastructure. There was little for young people to do within these suburbs, but neighbouring suburbs often had sports and other facilities that young people should have been able to use, if they had the necessary resources.

Another feature of these suburbs was their visual poverty – they *looked* poor, with evidence of vandalism. This was compounded if not caused by (we were told), official neglect and low levels of local authority maintenance. Young people in these suburbs reported that police did not respond, or were slow to respond, to crimes committed in the area, but often came to the suburb looking for perpetrators of crimes reported in nearby suburbs.

Figure 5-3 shows SEIFA codes derived from the two Isolated Pocket suburbs examined for this analysis. Both the IRSD and the IEO are very low. The suburbs are however surrounded by other suburbs that are substantially better off (but still for the most part falling into the bottom half of the distribution of all suburbs). The term 'ghetto' was used to describe these suburbs by young participants in both sites who had no knowledge or connection to the other site. The term ghetto is a highly contested term in the academic literature (Pattillo, 2003; Wacquant, 1997) and a highly provocative and misused term in the popular press.

Figure 5-3: SEIFA Indexes for Isolated Pocket Suburbs and Surrounds

Note: The grey area shows SEIFA scores in the suburb itself and the white boxes show SEIFA scores in the neighbouring suburbs.

Scholars argue that racial segregation and subjugation rather than poverty are key identifiers of ghettos. Certainly, the sites that were Isolated Pocket suburbs in the *Making a Difference* Study were not described to us by young people as racially segregated and were thereby not ghettos on this definition. Young people's accounts of their area suggested they were socio-economically excluded and their use of the term ghetto served to underscore their sense of being subjugated by their better-off neighbours.[15]

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[15] The intensive case study site discussed later was an Isolated Pocket suburb.

Region of Disadvantage

Like the low cost income mortgage belt these areas are significant in size and population. The SEIFA deciles of these suburbs at a postcode level indicate these suburbs are comprised of families who are economically struggling. When postcode level aggregates are broken down by collection district the picture is fairly consistent showing the vast majority of households among the most disadvantaged in Australia[16].

We talked with nineteen young people from two *Region of Disadvantage* suburbs. These suburbs were characterised by their seemingly large size (unlike Isolated Pocket suburbs they are not visually demarcated by better off suburbs around them), and by the scale and depth of disadvantage experienced by people who lived in them. Unlike all the other suburb types, these suburbs were surrounded by other, equally disadvantaged, suburbs and these suburbs by equally disadvantaged suburbs.

Like the Isolated Pocket suburbs that we visited, Region of Disadvantage suburbs have considerable amounts of public housing stock that are beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Some of the housing has been subject to re-development and has been sold off as low-income affordable housing to promote a social mix.

ABS data show that employment profiles in the Regions of Disadvantage suburbs

Figure 5-4: SEIFA Scores for Region of Disadvantage Suburbs and Surrounds

Note: The grey area shows SEIFA scores in the suburb itself and the white boxes show SEIFA scores in the neighbouring suburbs.
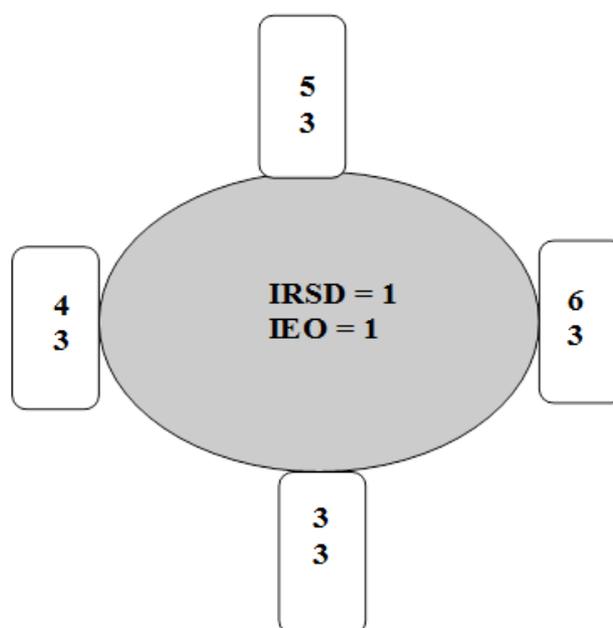
are similar to those in Isolated Pocket suburbs, with half of the working-age population not in the labour force, and only a quarter in full-time employment. ABS data also show that the populations in these areas are highly mobile. However, young people's accounts suggest that much of this mobility was to and from nearby like suburbs. Similar to the Isolated Pocket suburbs, these suburbs were poorly serviced by public transport, the Region of Disadvantage suburbs we visited were visually poor, with high levels of vandalism and low standards of

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[16] Average scores for these suburbs sit at around 770 on the IRSD. The minimum score are at about 650 and the maximum scores close to 920. At the SLA level most collection districts (~ 48/75) are in the bottom percentile.

public custodianship. Facilities and infrastructure (often poorly maintained) were dotted throughout a series of like suburbs. Although one study location had public transport that was quite good in terms of frequency and length of time across the day that it was available, the other did not.

Figure 5-4 illustrates the most striking feature of Region of Disadvantage – the extent to which they were embedded in similar regions that are equally disadvantaged.

Middle Ring Transit suburbs

Three suburbs we visited have been categorised as *Middle Ring Transit suburbs*. We spoke to twenty-six young people living in these types of suburbs. Unlike the other three suburb types, these suburbs were not on the urban fringe, but were located closer to the centres of the capital cities. They therefore tended to be well serviced in terms of public transport, public and commercial services, and employment. However, these were not inner city suburbs that are typically among the most affluent in Australian cities. They were located on the middle ring of major Australian cities and were socio-economically very mixed.

They all contained, or had nearby, light industry zones as well as residential and commercial zones. Housing prices in these suburbs we visited were below the average for their respective cities. Infrastructure and facilities of interest to young people generally appeared to be plentiful and of high quality, as were public transport systems that allowed young people to use that infrastructure. Middle Ring Transit suburbs in Australia often have high concentrations of low cost private rental dwellings and some public housing (Randolph and Holloway, 2007). ABS data show that the suburbs we visited had a high level of cultural and linguistic diversity, and high levels of mobility.

Figure 5-5: SEIFA Scores for Middle Ring Transit Suburbs and Surrounds
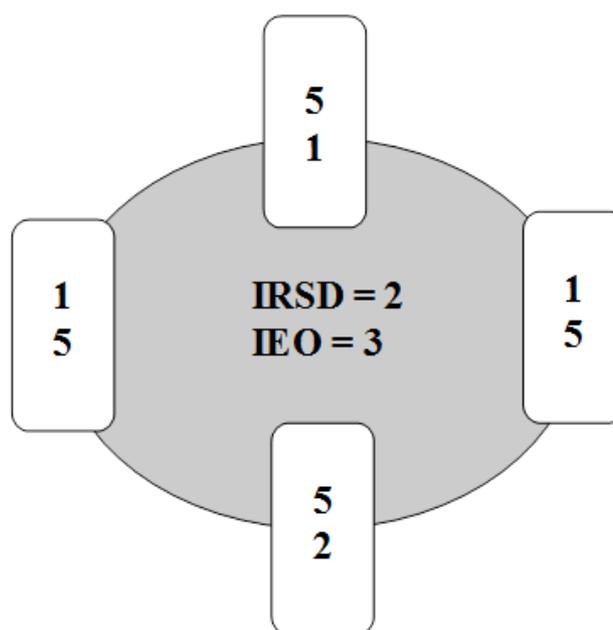
Note: The grey area shows SEIFA scores in the suburb itself and the white boxes show SEIFA scores in the neighbouring suburbs.

Figure 5-5 shows that the three Middle Ring Transit suburbs in the study scored well below the average on both SEIFA scores. The surrounding suburbs had varying levels of socio-economic disadvantage and educational and occupational attainment, ranging from average to significantly below average. In terms of young people's perceptions, the most notable feature of these suburbs was the diversity of participation milieus that they reported.

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Of all the four suburb types, these suburbs appeared to offer young people more opportunities for experiencing a wide range of cultures and activities, and many of the young people we talked to took advantage of the possibilities offered. For this reason, we are not offering an overview of participation patterns and opportunity contexts in these areas. This possible complexity of work warrants a study in its own right.

5.5. Participation Milieus and Opportunity Contexts

It is perhaps useful to begin discussion of the data by benchmarking the more typical participation patterns of young Australians. At the age of 10 years, when participation in sport and organised out-of-school activities are peaking, 71 per cent of Australian children are participating in some kind of such activity (Holden, 2009). The participants in *Making a Difference* were older than 10, but we investigated not only what they were doing now, but also what they had done in the past. We also talked with three young people who turned up for interviews but did not indicate experiencing economic adversity. We have as a rule not included their stories when mapping out patterns and themes in the experiences of economic adversity, but they do form an interesting counterpoint, particularly in relation to participation. Vanessa is one of these participants.

Low Cost Mortgage Belts – opportunity contexts and participation milieus

Vanessa lived in a Low Cost Mortgage Belt. As we progressed through interviews at the site where she lived, it became clear that young people considered the level of participation described by Vanessa as a 'norm' in the area. Most of the young people we spoke to were able to not participate in extra-curricula or elective activities as broadly or as often as Vanessa but they thought that most other young people in the area did. In this sense, they spoke about their own participation using this 'norm' as a reference point.

Figure 5-6: Vanessa's Opportunity Context

It is useful to detail Vanessa's participation habits as it allows us to contrast Vanessa's participation with two examples of young people experiencing economic adversity from this neighbourhood type. What is perhaps most significant about these differences in participation is the impact that the norms of their better-off peers had on young people experiencing economic adversity. It is important to note that while there were some quite detrimental effects expressed by young people whose participation was at a much lower rate than their peers, there were also some potentially positive effects.

Aged 12, Vanessa lived in a Low Cost

Mortgage Belt suburb and participated in a number of out-of-school structured activities. She suggested this was financially easy for her family. Her mother worked in a clerical position and her father in retail. Her parents would have been positioned in the socio-economic 'middle' of her postcode.

They were keen for her to have opportunities, but had not sent her to a private secondary school. In this area, some young people we spoke to had been to primary school with wealthier friends who went on to attend private secondary schools. Vanessa's parents had split up and re-partnered (with other people) and she was the only dependant in her primary household (she had 2 adult siblings and 2 younger ones living with her father and his new partner).

Vanessa had participated in a range of out-of-school activities throughout her childhood. She had been in a choir and a swimming squad for over a year but had moved on to dancing and other performing arts.

> *I do dancing on a Tuesday and a Thursday. And I do singing lessons in school. Well, I used to do choir, but I had to drop that 'cos mum didn't get home from work in time to take me…Like I do productions on the weekends. I did one last year. I was in 'Oliver'.*

Vanessa aspired to become a singer and to use her skills professionally. The literature on aspirations suggests that younger people of Vanessa's age are most likely to be idealistic and will be modified as they develop their understanding of the world and accumulate feedback on their attainment (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). It is reasonable then, to identify Vanessa's aspirations as potentially idealistic but grounded given the cultural capital she had gained through lessons and performances at the regional theatre company. Figure 5-6 gives a graphic representation of Vanessa's opportunity context.

As before, the numbers show the SEIFA indexes for the neighbourhood type where she lived, the lightly shaded area shows her neighbourhood and the darker shading indicates the range of her knowledge and sense of the facilities and services accessible to her. In Vanessa's case this knowledge is built on the activities she had participated in over time. Her opportunity context extended from the neighbourhood where she lived and included arts facilities in the regional hub. While Vanessa's opportunity context was not necessarily a large area, it encompassed multiple rich opportunity structures that enabled her to meet and mix with a diverse range of people and to develop skills which were transferable into schooling experiences.

Texas (a boy, aged 13 years) also described a high level of participation in structured activities but in contrast to the apparent ease of Vanessa's situation, his family found it difficult to meet the costs. Texas lived in a two-parent family with his two younger siblings. His family's income was garnered together with intermittent labouring work, the highest forms of subsidy available through the schooling system, supplementary support for costs

from NGOs, and grandparents' contributions. His parents moved in and out of employment, and the family moved often between rental properties in the area.

Like Vanessa, he spoke of participation in relatively expensive out of school activities in a normative way. While he and his family may have viewed this participation as normative, they struggled to find the money. Texas played basketball in various competitions and his capacity to participate was connected to a mesh of enabling factors. His school supported his sporting talents in inter-school competitions by delaying or waiving payments. His grandparents helped to pay the fees for him to regularly participate in a basketball clubs and sometimes provided the transport/supervision for him to get to and from the club. (He relied on his mates to get to 'away' games). His mother's part-time work allowed her to drive him to games. Texas contributed care for the two younger siblings in his family while his parents worked and met other obligations.

Even though Texas understood (and helped overcome) the difficulty his family had in meeting these costs, he appeared to take for granted his participation in competition basketball. He commented on the costs of basketball in the following way:

Figure 5-7: Texas' Opportunity Context

Texas: *The school one [competition] isn't really expensive because you haven't paid anything yet, but I've had to pay for the rep team I think it was $160...$15 a game and it is $8 a game for the other team and $80 for the uniform that I still got to get.*

Interviewer: OK and are those costs hard for your parents at this time?

Texas: *At this time sort of ... because no one's got much work... but mum and that still get around to paying it.*

Texas' friends at school all played some kind of sport and this appeared to be how they connected socially. In the context of the participation of most of his peers, it is not surprising that he took the efforts his family made to pay sporting costs for granted.

Texas' perception of the opportunity structures around him reached beyond his immediate suburb, as Figure 5-7 illustrates with a shaded ring. This opportunity context encompassed facilities within the regional hub and in the neighbouring suburb. Through his participation in basketball, Texas was mixing with a range of people to the north and to the west of his suburb.

At 13 years of age, he was more focussed on the game than the social relationships. His view of the world was broader than his immediate environment. He founded his short-term aspirations on continuation of his basketball playing (citing professional basketball as a career) with a longer term goal of doing marine biology at University (to the west of his suburb) and working with sharks. While there was a regional university fairly close by, his ambition of going to university may well have taken him out of the region itself. Like Vanessa, his high aspirations may have been idealistic, but were grounded in his experiences and the cultural capital he was accumulating and were potentially realistic. In spite of the economic adversity his family was experiencing, Texas had relatively broad horizons. He was experienced at mixing with peers from a variety of backgrounds and at meeting the timetabling and performance requirements that accompany team sports.

The third salient example of how these norms of participation were a reference point for young people in this area comes from Henri (female, age 12 years, Victoria). Henri lived in a two-parent household (with her mother and stepfather) with 5 siblings (2 older and one younger brother and 2 younger sisters) and 3 older step-sisters. Both parents worked casual shifts in low-paid jobs and like many of the Islander families in the study, tithed to their church. Henri was of a Pacific Islander heritage and as such her story can be read in contrast with Tessa's story.

Henri rarely participated in any activities with additional costs. She did however play free netball in a neighbouring suburb.

Figure 5-8: Henri's Opportunity Context

As is illustrated in Figure 5-8 by the dark shading, Henri's opportunity context extended to the regional centre where this was played. She saw herself as part of the team, even though she was rarely able to meet the time commitments and participate. Transport to the sports centre was contingent on her mother's ability to arrange her shifts at a local fast food outlet.

This transport difficulty was compounded by Henri's caring responsibilities for younger siblings. Poor transport was mentioned by all young people (including Vanessa) as a significant barrier to their participation and this was a recurring theme across all outer ring study sites. In these Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburbs, many parents worked in jobs with little flexibility and sometimes little reliability in terms of hours, and these work arrangements curtailed parents' capacity to drive young people to out of school activities. Furthermore, like

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Henri, many participants had caring responsibilities for younger siblings while their parents were at work.

While Henri shared a view of her neighbourhood that extended beyond her immediate postcode, she did not actually participate in activities to the same extent as many of her peers. Apart from limited participation in structured out of school activities because of cost, Henri also missed out because of her caring responsibilities.

> *No. Because like my mum, like my stepdad he goes to work at night and my mum goes in the morning and then I have to look after my little sister (6 years) and my little brother (2 years) in the morning and afternoon. And at night my mum can look after them because my stepdad won't oh yeah.*

While Henri did insist she wanted to play basketball, she also took a stance of 'not liking' many of the other fee attracting activities available in the area, such as going to school camps and sporting competitions. This stance of 'not liking' things that it was not possible to do is referred in the literature as adapted or adaptive preference.

Adaptive preferences were a feature of the talk of young people who had grown up in areas where they could not afford to do the things that other young people typically could do. It was most obvious in the stories of young people like Henri who lived in areas where they were aware of a set of participation norms that were beyond what their families could afford. Henri did, however, participate with friends in informal sport and was particularly skilled in skateboarding, including building skateboards. In spite of constrains on her capacity to participate, Henri was able to accumulate some of the benefits of mixing at school with those who did participate broadly. She understood what was available across the region and held onto a sense of herself as one who would later participate in higher education and in organised team sports.

For most young people living in the Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburb, opportunity contexts extended to the regional centre and neighbouring suburbs, even if they could not afford to participate. The regional centre offered a range of activities from sport to arts based programs. The participation milieu in the area was one where participation in out-of-school structured activities was expected.

Importantly, the stories of a number of participants in this area showed that they were actively resistant to the idea of using services and facilities in the neighbouring suburb (to the east in Figure 5-8) that was characterised by deep disadvantage, and fits our profile of an Isolated Pocket suburb. They referred to young people from that area as 'troubled'. One young person responded to a question about whether they would engage in any of the music workshops offered by the youth centre in the neighbouring Isolated Pocket suburb by saying: '*Oh there, no! That's for troubled kids*'

To summarise, the opportunity contexts in Low cost mortgage belts extended into the metropolitan centre for most young people including those who were economically disadvantaged. The suburb itself was vast and had several key opportunity structures (a sports

clubs, swimming pool and library outpost). Importantly, young people had a good knowledge of what existed elsewhere, including higher education institutions and felt entitled to use these resources (if they could afford them).

The participation milieu in these areas involved participation in organised out of school activities. Young people experiencing economic adversity in these areas could not afford to participate to the same extent as their better off counterparts and missing out carried some personalised stigma. However, young people did have opportunities to mix with others with reasonably wide horizons.

Isolated Pocket - opportunity contexts and participation milieus

In Isolated Pocket suburbs structured out-of-school activities were not available and young people typically did not see activities in the wider region as accessible. In one of our sites a local football club that played in regional competitions had started and faltered because of the community's limited capacity to sustain the management of such an organisation. The ground had not been maintained by council since this time. Young people's knowledge of services in the wider region appeared to depend on having lived 'out there' at some stage. Most of the more stable residents knew next to nothing about what was on offer in other suburbs. In these areas, young people expressed little identification with anything beyond the borders of their own postcode area.

This narrow space of belonging differentiated the young people living in this suburb from those who lived in other suburb types. In some study sites, local drop-in style youth services provided free project-based activities. In most cases, these appeared to be highly successful services from the point of view of the young people and certainly operated in such a way that young people had something to do, somewhere to go during opening hours and opportunities to form relationships with adults beyond their families. These project-based activities were often targeted to gender or cultural groups. Projects for boys included aerosol art, hip hop production projects, or more broadly targeted band competitions. Projects for girls focussed on girls health, and building and construction and was delivered in ways that were appealing to girls. These project based initiatives differed from structured out-of-school activities in that they were one-off opportunities (this was what worked in these areas) and did not provide the opportunity to develop skills and relationships through shared activity with people who were different from different areas with different participation milieus.

With little or no opportunity to engage in structured activities of the kind described above, young people engaged in unstructured activities. They constructed goal posts for informal games, and then tore them down again. They hung out in green spaces. Indeed, green spaces were highly utilized in the area by adults, young people and children with particular areas attracting particular types of activity.

Young people in the 11–13 years age range often played alone or in pairs in secluded green spaces they considered safe. As they got older, they tended towards more public areas where they could congregate with peers, these spaces where larger numbers gathered were more problematic in terms of tensions erupting between different groups. Many of the parents in

these areas were concerned about safety in the neighbourhood and imposed strict controls on what young people could do. (This is further discussed in Chapter 7).

The stresses of hanging out in neighbourhoods under stress were palpable in Casey's account of her activities. Casey (female, 14 years, NSW) was from a single parent family with two older siblings who now lived independently. Her mother was on a disability pension. Casey spent time hanging out in mixed gender groups in the neighbourhood, at the local youth centre, and in her friend Nikita's house. Casey's mother got sick routinely and when this happened Casey moved in for the duration with her friend Nikita, who by all accounts had a lively, loving family.

Figure 5-9 shows Casey's opportunity context. Casey participated in activities at the youth centre that were directed towards young girls (craft, health and self-esteem based activities, and so on), but primarily spent time 'hanging out' with groups of young people in the neighbourhood. This hanging out did not involve informal sports as it did for some of the other young people in the area. When asked what hanging out was like she described it as:

Figure 5-9: Casey's opportunity context

> *Heaps safe, I have only been living here for 3 years but everyone knows people I know, they see me walking around with boys and stuff like popular boys in Tridentown.*
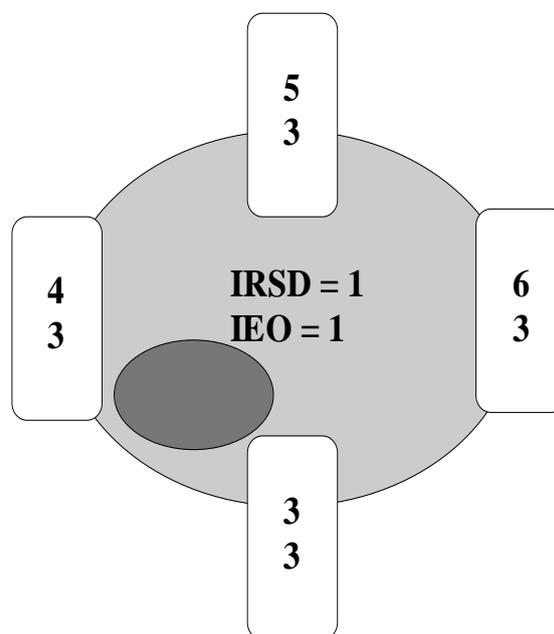
Her friend Nikita who had been bullied in the alleyways near their home also described the neighbourhood as:

> *Heaps safe, because I know if I got bashed I know they[my brothers] would be over and smash down their [the bully's] door. And my sister is going out with this dude and he knows everyone from Tridentown too, I feel heaps safe because of just the people I know, I know everyone.*

This emphasis on being 'heaps safe' was somewhat undercut by accounts of bullying. Across all study sites, young people made this type of comment about the importance of knowing and being known in the neighbourhood in relation to hanging out activities. These comments underscore how vulnerable to hostility many young people feel. In this sense, Casey's participation in activities directed to empower girls in the neighbourhood were well placed. She and Nikita did not hold aspirations for themselves beyond imagining their weddings, which indicates strongly limited horizons. Aspirations about securing relationships were

common in these areas even among older young men. Many young people we spoke to had strong bonding capital and directed much of their energy towards maintaining this capital because of the safety it brought. In contrast few had bridging capital or access to opportunities to bridge to others living in different circumstances.

Tessa's story is a good example of what it was like to grow up in a tight ethnic minority group (like Henri) in this neighbourhood. Figure 5-10 illustrates Tessa's opportunity context. Tessa lived in a two-parent household with 3 siblings and her cousin. Neither of her parents were in work. Tessa did not participate in any structured out of school activities.

Figure 5-10: Tessa's opportunity context

She went to the local youth centre one afternoon a week to use the internet, but did not participate in any of the project based activities that ran from the centre. She was expected to be at home at other times. Tessa and her siblings were expected to look after younger children and to contribute to housework. The family often visited relatives living in the area after school. When asked about young people's activities, Tessa explained:

> *Like people just play football and this (Youth Centre) that's it….in the Park and sometimes the kids play there…not like a formal club? The kids they just come out and play us. They sneak out, 1, 2, 3 and then they run from home. People do things like go to play with their friends.*

When asked if she mixed with any young people who lived in neighbouring suburbs Tessa responded: '*No but if I did I know it would be my fault.*' Tessa infers that if she mixed beyond her own area something would go wrong and she would be blamed. This comment draws attention to the sense of exclusion she felt from young people in surrounding suburbs. This sense may have been a factor in discouraging her (and other young people) from venturing out and participating in activities with young people from other areas. In this sense, Tessa and her peers were not necessarily being paranoid as is evidenced in the comment by the young person (on a similar income) who lived in a Low Cost Mortgage Belt when he referred to young people in the disadvantaged suburb adjoining his as 'troubled'. This is the flip side of the exclusionary mechanism that was articulated by Tessa.

In Isolated Pocket suburbs, the boys we spoke to were similarly confined to their postcode area and unaware of opportunity structures beyond the neighbourhood. However, boys tended
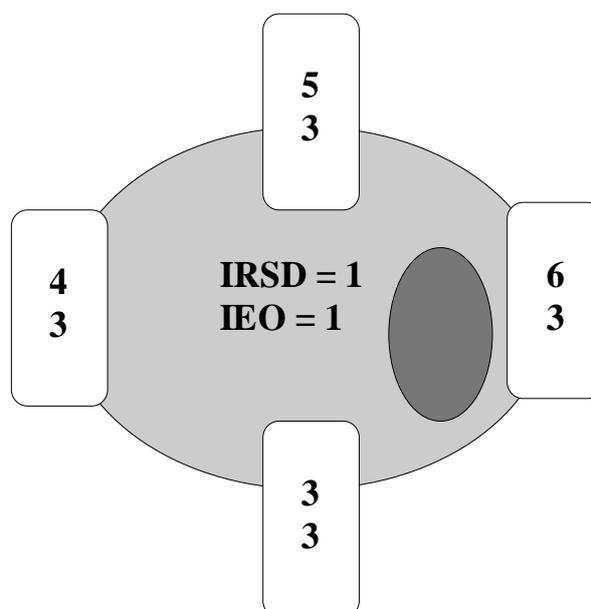
to be less constrained by parental control and more likely to venture into the mall and other places where they came into contact with young people from other suburbs.

To summarise, the opportunity contexts in Isolated Pocket suburbs were tightly confined and young people expressed a strong sense of exclusion from outside the suburb. Their own suburb had few opportunity structures (as is probably true of most individual suburbs) but few young people knew about what existed elsewhere, much less stepped over their postcode threshold to participate in structured activities.

The participation milieu in these areas involved hanging out, informal footy or basketball games in public spaces and programs run from the local youth centre. In general, young people did not clearly articulate a sense of diminished opportunities for themselves but did indicate they would raise their own families elsewhere because of a sense that people in their suburb were going nowhere. While this participation milieu was highly limited and opportunity contexts constrained, young people in these areas did not express the personalised stigma of missing out and carried a sense of being in it together. Importantly, however, young people had no opportunities to engage in shared activities on an equal footing with other young people outside of their immediate neighbourhood. There were no opportunities for the sustained engagement that allows young people to develop the skills to meet others on an equal footing (which typically comes of engagement in competition sports, membership of arts based organisations and so on).

Region of disadvantage - opportunity contexts and participation milieus

In these areas, there was a relatively limited culture of participation in structured activities. However, in contrast to Isolated Pocket suburbs, young people had a broad knowledge of what was available beyond their suburb and this often stretched across several adjoining suburbs. There was a high level of consistency in what young people knew about. They were informed about the costs of various activities and many participants had used local facilities at some time or other. While the number of participants who came from this type of suburb was relatively small there was remarkable consistency in the way young people experienced and utilised their neighbourhood.

A number of young people discussed activities at the YMCA which ran both structured team-based activities as well as drop-in opportunities. They frequently named clubs and facilities in adjoining suburbs and across the broader region. One of the reasons for young people's awareness of what was around them may have been that many from this cohort had moved around adjoining suburbs in the area. The other factor that may have contributed to this solid knowledge about opportunity structures (wider than many participants from other areas), may have been that some key organizations in the area had delivered services to communities for generations and whose names are easily recognizable – the YMCA, the Country Fire Association, the Scouts.

Our interviews suggested that many families had lived in the region (not necessarily the suburb) for generations. Duncan and Smith (2002) discuss the importance of family histories and attachments to an area in terms of how neighbourhood is experienced and conceived. In

the case of participation milieus in areas where there has been relative generational stability, intergenerational recognition may well be a factor that influences the scale of young people's opportunity contexts.

Figure 5-11 illustrates Mitch's opportunity context. Mitch came from a single parent household and had two older brothers living independently, one older brother at home and a younger sister. His mother received unemployment benefits. Mitch was aware of many activities available in his region. He did not participate in any regular structured activities but was aware of what was around him. He did play 'random' games at the YMCA in a neighbouring suburb and used other facilities in the region at different times.

Figure 5-11: Mitch's opportunity context
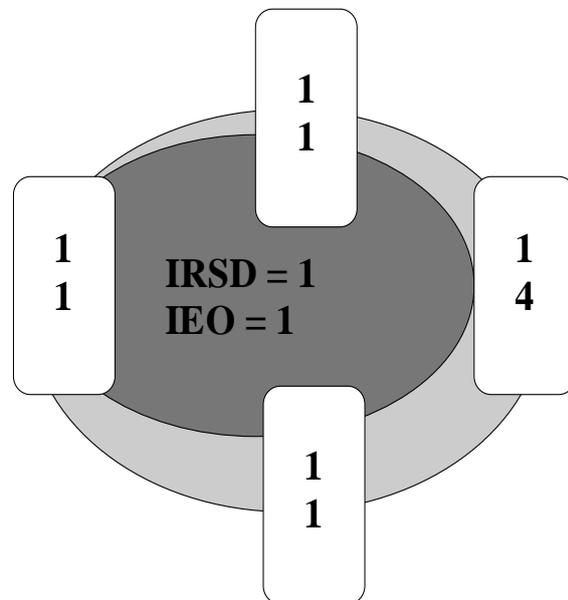
The cost of participation was prohibitive for many young people in both in-school and out-of-school activities in this area. Mitch was aware of the cost of these activities to his family, and looked for the least expensive options.

Mitch:	*No. I play in a basketball team outside school.*
Interviewer:	So do you play like in a competition?
Mitch:	*No you just play games like play random games.*
Interviewer:	And is it expensive?
Mitch:	*No.*
Interviewer:	And what about does the school have any sports teams that you can play in?
Mitch:	*No. It's too dear.*
Interviewer:	What do they offer?
Mitch:	*Soccer, netball, basketball, football and I think that's it.*
Interviewer:	So what kind of things do you have to pay for? Do you have to pay every week or?
Mitch:	*No got to pay for the jersey, you got to pay for the equipment and that. And I think you have to pay for your games. It's too expensive, yeah that's why I don't play there.*
Interviewer:	And that's why you play out of school?
Mitch:	*Yep, at the YMCA.*
Interviewer:	What kind of things do you do of an afternoon? Are there places where you can go or?
Mitch:	*I just stay home and play Playstation.*

A feature of the interviews in this area was a directness about the difficulty of participation in activities their better-off counterparts take for granted. The young people clearly thought financial constraints were commonplace and carried little stigma in the immediate community. Mitch told us about a variety of tactics that he and his friends used to get into swimming pools (several suburbs away), or hang out in games arcades with no money.

> *Yeah I suppose like there's heaps of stuff yeah there's a swimming centre you got to pay to get into and stuff like usually it's only like six or seven bucks to get in but some kids just can't you know, some kids just can't afford it yeah. I had no money when I was going into the swimming centre with mate. If one of them has been standing at the door and the lady's just [looked the other way] ... walk on through! You know, 'cheers' and walk straight through.*

The guarded frankness about how young people managed participation on low incomes was different to the way young people talked to us in other areas where admissions were only ever about what 'other' kids or 'poor' kids would do.

Like Mitch, Amanda-May was frank and open about youth cultures. She did not view herself and her peers as 'troubled' which is to some degree to assert powerlessness but instead stated '*Kids around here, they're pure naughty*', asserting agency rather than powerlessness.

Amanda-May lived with her single mother. She had four grown-up brothers and in her own words *'was spoilt'* by them. At least two of them contributed money so she could do things she wanted and when she was younger she had done singing lessons several suburbs from her home. This participation set her apart from many of her friends who did not have these opportunities. At 14, Amanda-May was no longer participating in structured adult organised activities but hanging out with large groups of young people in her neighbourhood. As Figure 5-12 shows, awareness of what was available in the area spread over two largish areas. Facilities she knew of included music schools as well as community services.

She had skills but unlike her counterparts in the Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburbs, she planned on using these skills in her immediate community.

Amanda-May:	*I've learnt to play the organ and the piano when I was about 6 and 7. I used to go to this place [in suburb two stops away], for organ lessons.*
Interviewer:	And how long did you do that for?
Amanda-May*:*	*I did that for three years.*
Interviewer:	OK so you've got fairly solid music base then.
Amanda-May:	*Yep I've been singing ever since I was like three.*
Interviewer:	OK are you going to do anything with singing and music?
Amanda-May:	*I sing in the shower in the house at karaoke at [names two local venues].*

Interviewer: And who goes?

Amanda-May: *Everyone. whole family and your friends. Friends*
family, people we don't know and everything.

Amanda-May saw that she could use the skills she was accumulating in her extra-curricular activities within her own community, but did not communicate to us that they might enable her to bridge to new communities or have new experiences. This is a clear difference from Vanessa, who saw similar skills as a route to employment.

Like several other young people in her area, Amanda-May differentiated between user pays services, community services and welfare based services. She saw local services delivered by an organization historically associated with welfare as a remedial service, explaining:

Figure 5-12: Amanda-May's opportunity context

    Like where you go and you meet
other young people? Oh, that. Oh, yeah. We do that in there, and that's
where we get our confidence up, and to achieve our goals.

Her speech slowed down in the last two phrases of the last sentence and communicated that groups designed to transmit skills such as goal-setting and confidence building were patronising. Certainly one of the features of the talk of both young people and their parents was a sense that community and welfare based services saw them in terms of deficiencies. We do not have any evidence that this was how they were in fact treated by services, rather we suggest that there were potentially historical and intergenerational factors which may have contributed to a view that they were considered in terms of deficiencies. This potentially makes the take-up of opportunities difficult for young people and shapes the local participation milieu.

Like young people in all areas, hanging out with large groups of peers had its attractions, but was fraught at times. Amanda May described the vulnerabilities of being a girl in these contexts in an oblique way that foregrounded her independence and autonomy but flagged some of the difficulties with boys who 'get like weird'.

    Well the Plumfield boys … they're a group of boys that live in Plumfield
and there's like 260 of them. They go out every Saturday night to hang a
lot. Every Saturday night they go to the shops and they get the older ones
to buy alcohol and smokes. And they just drink, graff, smoke, get in

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> *trouble. They hang at the back of the shops there's the Kindy and then there's primary school; hang just like in between. Near the baker and stuff. I am a Plummy girl but I don't choose to hang with them.*

When asked if hanging with this crowd was safe for a girl she said:

> *Yeah sort of, I don't know. Not when they're drinking. They just get like weird and stuff. I stay away from them... I try to do my hardest but everywhere I go there's always one Plummy boy right beside me and I'm just like 'can you stop following me now'. 'But we don't want you to get hurt, you're a Plummy girl. We got to protect you and stuff'. They're all my cousins, the Plummy boys.*

The opportunity contexts of the young people in the Region of Disadvantage suburbs were large in size but not very diverse or well resourced in terms of opportunity structures. Young people had participation milieus that involved random one-off activities but that rarely involved structured activities. This was primarily because of the cost involved. Most young people hung out with others in public spaces. Young people in these areas of wide and deep disadvantage tended not to express a sense of exclusion because when they compared themselves to others, their experiences were fairly similar.

To summarise, the opportunity contexts in regions of disadvantage were large and extended beyond the participant's immediate suburb into and across neighbouring suburbs. The participation milieu in these areas involved informal out of school activities and hanging out. Young people experiencing economic adversity in these areas felt as though everyone they knew was in the same boat and there was very little personalised stigma. The opportunities structures were very similar in all suburbs in the region but were often of poor quality or poorly maintained across all suburbs.

The activities on offer tended to be free or at very low cost (subsidised by local government or NGOs) but there was little range and they contained few rich learning opportunities. Young people had a good knowledge of what existed elsewhere, and felt entitled to use these resources (if they could afford them). While they had an expansive sense of territory where they were welcome, the opportunities available to them did not bring them into contact with the forms of bridging capital that generate access to jobs and broaden horizons.

5.6. Effects of These Participation Milieus

To some degree the participation milieus where young people were immersed had separate effects to the young person's actual opportunity context. Schools were able to capitalise on rich participation milieus where they existed, and young people in those schools were able to benefit from the participation of others.

In the Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburbs, the local school ran a rich performing arts program which then further contributed to these skills for the students who were not regular participants as well as for those who were. Furthermore, young people in resource strapped

families with low levels of educational capital but living in the Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburbs had broad horizons and aspirations. This reflects the aspirational age patterns found in Alloway et al.'s (2004) studies of aspirations in regional communities. In this work, high aspirations and back up plans is typical of young people at age 11-13.

Texas knew where the local university was, and while he aspired to be a professional basketballer, his back-up plan was to be a marine biologist. Henri too aspired towards a university education, knew about the local university and the subjects she needed to complete at school and the types of marks she needed to achieve this goal. These young people picked up this information from school and their friends in the neighbourhood. They were embedded in a participation milieu where educational know-how and capital circulated and this broadened their horizons.

While schools were able to capitalise to some extent on the participation milieus in their local areas, and extend the horizons of some young people who might otherwise have quite narrow experiences, there appears to be a tipping point for individual young people. The cohort of early school leavers in the sample who had come from areas of socio-economic mix typically expressed an increasing sense of isolation when they could not participate in the activities that others took for granted.

This means that while there are potential benefits for young people who live in areas of socio-economic mix, these young people also have to deal with the stigma of being 'poor' that is pronounced and experienced at a very personal level. Adapting their 'preferences' was one of the ways young dealt with this, but adapting one's preferences could potentially negate the positive effects of broadening one's horizons.

In Isolated Pocket suburbs, schools struggled to capitalise on the skills young people accumulated through their out of school experiences. To some extent this was a problem of recognition. Teachers did not recognise the skills young people had because they were accumulated in ways that were not familiar to teachers. Furthermore, the effects of hanging-out in neighbourhoods that were not safe were keenly felt by schools. Classroom behaviour was often disrupted because of neighbourhood tensions. Narrow experiences had effects on the aspirations of young people and many struggled to have any clear plans beyond 'getting a job'.

As a group there was little diversity in young people's aspirations which suggests a collectively narrow experience with employment. Many young people looked to professions connected to law and order – policing was the highest preference – even among those with ambivalent experiences with the police. Perhaps more realistically and immediately, many young people looked to fast food outlets as potential employers. Indeed several study participants did gain employment in fast food chains on employment programs for those with intellectual disabilities or special needs (programs the schools contracted out to private jobsearch companies).

While labour markets clearly existed in the area of Isolated Pocket suburbs (employment figures for the wider regions are not representative of the neighbourhood), neighbourhood level discourses supported the view that addresses in these suburbs tended to have the effect of closing doors with potential employers. One parent told us that once employers saw the suburb name '*they don't even want to know*'.

In these areas, there was a strong reliance on formal job search strategies. Young people most commonly cited Centerlink offices as where they would go to get a job. Historically, Centerlink offered employment services but many of these services have now been put out for tender and are run by different agencies and branded differently. Young people's sense that this is the best place to go tends to perhaps reflect the limited resources in their families.

Schools in the Region of Disadvantage suburbs also appeared to struggle to recognise and capitalise on the skills young people gained outside of school in their informal activities. Young people described curriculum that failed to engage them, their skills and the complexities of their out of school lives.[17] Depressed labour markets impacted on young people's view of work and many had unrealistic hopes of getting rich quick. Mitch typically articulated what we came to think of as 'the mining dream' that was common in the way boys thought about their futures. Many told us they would go and work in the mines to make money. Like his mates, Mitch did not have a clear sense of the trajectories involved, or of how to skill up in order to secure employment in the mining industry.

Apart from this focus on mining, young people in this area had indistinct employment plans and aspirations. Amanda-May was one of those with the clearest ideas. When asked about her post-school plans she said she was going to be a hairdresser, working out of her mum's garage. While backyard businesses were not uncommon in the area, this vision reflects a limited horizon. This pattern of thinking among young people in this region suggests that local opportunity structures do not provide the sorts of experiences that would permit young people to imagine and plan towards lives with greater access to resources. This surely should be a goal of policy directed at increasing the life chances of young people growing up in these areas of deep and wide disadvantage.

As our data shows, processes of exclusion, where people know that others expect them to fail (as Tessa suggested when she stated that if she engaged in activities with people from other areas something would go wrong and it would be her fault) operate to lock some young people out of participating in the very experiences that support self-efficacy, confidence and skills in social bridging. Furthermore, young people were very aware of the differences between 'remedial services' where they get 'their confidence up' and participation in competitive sports or arts based activities on a merit basis. This suggests that while

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[17] The design of the recruitment strategy for the study did not consider the quality of local educational settings, so our findings do not offer any systematic perspectives on educational quality. There are many interesting studies which show how schools can and do effectively engage young people from high poverty contexts (recent examples include Smyth, Down and McInerney 2010; Stehlik and Patternson 2011). What our findings do perhaps suggest, is that these good practices are not as widespread as they should be.

confidence building targeted services are important, they need to be accompanied by infrastructure and services that support young people to participate on an equal footing with their better-off counterparts.

5.7. Summary Comments

Young people's accounts of their participation in organised activities draws attention to the value of these activities in broadening horizons and developing networks, and in the development of tacit workforce skills. Participation in a diverse range of activities has a significant influence of participation in education and training (Semo and Kartmel, 2011) and it is crucial that policy makers understand and respond to the factors which restrict young people's capacity to participate.

When compared across neighbourhoods, stories from young people in the Making a Difference study highlight the uneven distribution of opportunities, and importantly the processes that exclude some young people from participation in the structures that are available. Furthermore, processes of inclusion or exclusion differ according to the social demographics within and surrounding their immediate neighbourhood and consequently will require tailored policy responses. This chapter has explored the opportunity contexts of young people in suburbs with different characteristics.

We found that young people in the more affluent (but still below the middle) Low Cost Mortgage Belt suburbs had larger and richer opportunity contexts than young people in other outer ring locations. While this is to be expected given that levels of income were generally higher, we found that in these areas young people (on similar incomes to their counterparts in Isolated Pocket and Region of Disadvantage suburbs) had similar-sized opportunity contexts to their better-off peers in their neighbourhood.

In this sense they had a sense of the opportunities that was more like their better off peers than young people on similar incomes who lived in different types of areas. This was true even when their own experiences were more restricted than what could be expected by neighbourhood norms. This suggests that neighbourhood effects are a factor in shaping young people's opportunities and participation habits, as well as family effects. It is important to note, that the young people who described the most social isolation and stigma also came from these better off suburbs. There appeared to be a tipping point where missing out when peers were not accumulated and became social isolation.

In Isolated Pocket areas, there were few if any opportunity structures. Layered and collective experiences of social exclusion created a tendency towards a myopic view of opportunities among young people living in these areas. There is no doubt that social exclusion intensified the numbers of people hanging out in these neighbourhoods with little to do and this in turn intensified neighbourhood tensions. It is important to note that we observed some excellent work on the part of youth agencies to get young people out of the suburb and in contact with the broader region.

However, it was clear that there was little reaching in and little for young people to connect to once out of the suburb. In this sense there were few opportunities for young people to develop bridging capital. Young people's insights about remedial services offer food for thought. Opportunities for engaging in shared activities on an equal footing are critical for the development of bridging capital that is transferable and not nominal. Young people need to have the opportunity to develop the layered accumulated skills that their better-off peers accumulate through on-going participation in structured activities if they are to share in activities on an equal footing.

The challenges facing policy makers in Region of Disadvantage suburbs are substantial. Labour market opportunities are weak in these areas and the scale of disadvantage is broad and deep. This in and of itself might not be an issue if structures are in place to support the development of skills and to support high but realistic aspirations. Furlong et al (1996) argue that the structure of local labour markets are a framework within which aspirations can develop but young people are also aware of the constraints of locality, what is available elsewhere and the possibility of moving towards labour markets. They concluded that local job markets are not a strong influence on aspirations (although they identified a gender dimension where boys in low income or jobless households were more likely to exhibit depressed aspirations and job proximity was more significant to girls).

Unlike their counterparts in Isolated Pocket areas, young people in these areas did not convey a sense of being actively excluded by anyone. Their opportunity contexts were not small in size but tended to be poor in resources – particularly in resources which supported tacit workforce skills including structured activities on an equal footing with young people whose circumstances were different to their own.

Finally, our data showed consistencies in young people's participation in the first three suburb types – Low cost mortgage belts, Isolated pocket suburbs and Region of disadvantage- but not in the fourth Middle ring transit suburbs. We have hypothesised that consistencies were more easily identifiable due to the relative isolation of suburbs on the outer ring of metropolitan cities. It is, however, important to note that our sample size in each neighbourhood type is relatively small and further research on how location shapes young people's opportunity contexts is needed.

Analysis of participation milieus and opportunity contexts illustrates the importance of thinking about the opportunity structures that support employment in a way that more tightly integrates services and structures that target across the stages of childhood and adolescence. While initiatives like the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions (NPYAT) allows for service delivery to be tailored at local levels, there is still too little attention to the structures that resource families and young people before formal transitions

and it remains to be determined if there are sufficient resources directed towards areas of significant disadvantage[18].

The findings from the *Making a Difference* study indicate that the interplay of neighbourhood opportunities, family backgrounds, the educational institutions and labour markets are shaping young people's trajectories long before they engage with the formal transitions from schooling to work. Furthermore, these trajectories are shaped by opportunity structures beyond those directly oriented to employment, and there is a need for improved provision of services and facilities that encourage participation in activities that broadly educate, bridge the familiar with the unfamiliar, and expand young people's awareness and experiences in ways that allow them to activate the capital they possess.

Public policy can provide opportunity structures that support young people to navigate schooling options effectively. It can and does attempt to support bridging capital[19]. One of the more important insights from the young people who contributed to this study is that those who live in areas of concentrated disadvantage have few opportunities to develop connections with people outside their established social circles because (in the case of Isolated Pocket type suburbs) the communities around them are not receptive to mixing and/or (in the case of Region of disadvantage type suburbs) people with significantly different forms of resources are geographically distant. What the findings of this study do strongly suggest is that policy aimed at increasing the bridging capital of economically disadvantaged young people needs to be tailored to the specificity of local areas and the dynamics of social exclusion that may operate in local areas.

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[18] The interim evaluation of the NPYAT is available at
http://www.deewr.gov.au/Youth/YouthAttainmentandTransitions/Documents/InterimEvaluationReport_Accessible.pdf

[19] Key examples are discussed in the following reviews and reports ; Productivity Commission, (2003) 'Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and Its Policy Implications.' Ausinfo; Hampshire, Anne, (2000) 'Stronger Communities and Social Connectedness - Social Capital in Practice.' Paper presented at the Council on the Aging National Congress; Simons, R. and Laverty, M. (2002) 'Learning for Life: Networks for Social Inclusion.' Paper presented at the Learning Cities and Regions Conference, Melbourne; Department of Victorian Communities (2003) Communities, *Neighbourhood Renewal Project* 2003 Available from http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au/programs/major_programs/neighbourhood.asp.

6. Quality of Home, Neighbourhood and School Environments

6.1. Introduction

Young people were particularly concerned with the quality of their home, leisure and learning environments and consistently expressed the desire for these environments to be adequately maintained, safe and vandalism free. It was clear from talking with the young people that their home, leisure and learning environments were interconnected and that poor quality environments in one domain had flow-on effects into other domains. For example, poor quality home environments often pushed young people into public spaces in the neighbourhood along with all the other residents from overcrowded homes. Desirable spaces in neighbourhoods then became sites of territorial disputes which then led to other 'public spaces', notably school environments, becoming disruptive environments.

Interpreting young people's answers to interview questions about the quality of their everyday environments and their sense of well-being within these environments required careful analytic strategies, as explained in Section 3.5. Young people were quick to emphasise the capabilities of their families to provide for them (unless there was very significant family breakdown) and quick to emphasise their own capacities.

This emphasis on being capable is best understood in relation to their perception of their rights to autonomy and independence - rights that were compromised by threats to their physical safety. Physical safety was a significant issue for many young people that threaded thickly through their discussion of their everyday environments. It is important to note that the perspectives of young people not in school are captured in Chapter 10, and the perspectives of participants in school about schooling environments are captured in Chapters 8 and 9.

6.2. Home Environments

Generally, young people spoke positively about their home environments and the importance of their 'home' to them. Home conveyed a sense of pride, a place filled with stories, memories, family and friends. Many young people described their home to include the surrounding areas. This is in keeping with the approach adopted by Kearns and Parkinson (2001) who talk about the 'home area' which includes anything within 5 to 10 minutes walk of the young person's physical home.

We were keen to explore the young people's perceptions of their homes more deeply and so in addition to the interviews and groupwork conducted at each of the sites, an additional research method was adopted for the in-depth study site (see Section 3.6). This method was respectful of young people's right to share as much or as little about their actual home as they would like, and involved offering them the opportunity to walk around their neighbourhood with members of the research team and take photographs of the things that were important to them.

Most of the young people chose to show the researchers their home (and take photographs of it), and talked about the importance of home. For example, Bob talks about feeling safe within her family space:

> *I feel safe there because my stepmum lives there. I feel safe at home (Bob, female, 13 years, NSW).*

The biggest concern was the lack of space in their home and the impact that this had on their relationships with family, friends and school, which the literature shows can, but may not necessarily, be an important issue in children's lives (Goux and Maurin, 2005). Most of the houses that the research team visited were publicly owned (in isolated pocket suburbs) although a small number of households were privately renting or paying off a mortgage (low cost mortgage belt suburbs). Publicly owned houses were generally small.[20] In many cases, lack of space was responsible for pushing young people into other environments.

A significant number of young people were living (in these small homes) in large households; many with 3 or more siblings. Given this, many had to share bedrooms with siblings and other family members. One young person noted that his brother shared a room with his grandmother whilst others noted that they or other family members did not have designated sleeping spaces. While this level of space deprivation is generally reckoned to be rare in Australia (UNICEF, 2010), it was common among the young people we spoke to. In their study of deprivation, Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths (2008) found that more than 80 per cent of the general population respondents said that each child should have a separate bed, and close to half said that a child aged 10 years and over should have his or her own bedroom. This suggests that many of the study participants were living in conditions that are neither normative in Australia, nor considered desirable.

The young people in the *Making a Difference* project often talked about feeling 'overcrowded':

> *Yeah we're just used to the squashing up (Anna, female, 12 years, Victoria).*

> *It is fine; I like my house, but it's too small (George, female, 14 years, NSW).*

Often lack of space impacted on relationships with family, friends and school. For some, lack of space meant that they did not have friends around to their home because of an already full house. For example, Brad was not allowed to bring friends home because things got too 'rowdy' in an already full house. In terms of family relationships, conflict was mainly

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[20] In South Australia however, public housing tended to have more land attached than was the case in Victoria or New South Wales. Therefore overcrowding was less common among the young people who we interviewed in South Australia. The composition of the housing stock in South Australia was also different to that in the other states. Publicly owned dwellings were more likely to be mixed with privately owned dwellings than in the other states. In some cases a public dwelling was attached to a privately owned dwelling – something that is rare in NSW and Victoria.

between siblings sharing rooms because they had no space of their own and often had to share personal things. For Brad, the sharing of personal things was the main cause of conflict:

> *Things that I don't like about sharing is probably is if it is mine I don't want to share it (Brad, male, 12 years, Vic.).*

While young people in crowded houses knew themselves to be overcrowded, they did not all experience this as negative. A number of young people suggested that overcrowding had its advantages. Some liked busy households and their friends had families of similar size. Others said they were never lonely and always had someone to 'hang out with'.

Whether they liked them or not, however, crowded houses did mean that young people were often out of the house socialising in public space. The quality of the public space therefore was critically important to their well-being.

Many young people who we talked with had similar stories. They frequently used parks and unregulated green space rather than spending time at home. A couple of the young people also mentioned that they used these spaces in the evenings. This had the potential to expose them to additional dangers and risks.

A number of young people suggested that little or no personal space in their home made homework difficult. This pushed them back into school environments. Some schools dealt with this situation by putting in place homework programs. These programs also offered learning support. Tessa was part of a large household, and found it easier to do her homework in the school library where there was ample space and it was quiet:

> *It is too hard to do it in the house; too much kids here (Tessa, female, 15 years, NSW).*

Others made their own decisions to move into other environments outside of the family home:

> *I am allowed to and stuff [have friends to my home] but I feel better when I am out like I am sick of being at home so I wouldn't bring my friends there ... it is boring, I do and I can but I haven't much – not as much as I used to (Emily, female, 15 years, Victoria).*

Young people talked about household strategies to create extra 'space'. These strategies included dividing single rooms (often living areas) into multiple rooms to create more 'individual' space for young people. For example, Joe talked about his lounge room being divided into two spaces to make a study. This allowed him to stay in the home environment rather than being pushed into school:

> *Our lounge is bigger, but we cut it in half. So we've still got a big lounge, we've got a study (Joe, male, 15 years, Vic).*

Another family where siblings were already sharing bedrooms converted their garage into a bedroom to make a private space for their eldest. In South Australia, where houses were on larger blocks of land, young people were more likely to talk about strategies their families used to create space. Some purchased caravans or added build-ons to create additional room. One of the young people we spoke to who lived in a caravan felt that he had the best of both worlds. He could join the family whenever he felt like it, but also retreat to his own individual space:

> *It was so good 'cos I had like heaps of people living in my house, and heaps of people always over, and if I just come into that van, I'm just by myself, just isolated (Chad Hugo, male, 17 years, SA).*

When asked about their homes, young people quite often discussed general neighbourhood degradation. They tended to think of their surrounding neighbourhood as part of their home space. For example, Tahlia talked about the burnt out houses surrounding her home:

> *They keep burning the houses in front of my house and I am waiting for this house ... there is a burnt house right in front of me and... I am waiting for a house across the alleyway to go up because they have set a car on fire (Tahlia, female, 14 years, NSW).*

This quote reveals some of the deeper anxieties that young people experienced about the safety of their home in an environment where it was commonly believed that houses were burnt in frustration and desperation. The burning of the houses encroached on the space that Tahlia thought of as her home space and reduced the amount of safe space for her. In the area where Tahlia lived, other young people expressed similar feelings and frustration with housing authorities who did not appear to redress the problem and who were slow to remove damaged properties.

In this same site, young people talked about the local highway which featured a noise protection wall on its borders to most residential areas, but was discontinued along the highway's border to the public housing suburb and then re-continued alongside private housing. Young people saw this type of deprivation in terms of public amenity as an indicator that they were not held in the same esteem as residents of other suburbs. Young people felt that their physical environments reflected the regard with which they were held by others and in particular by authorities. In this sense, state and local government policies related to the development and upkeep of public spaces in disadvantaged communities offer powerful messages to disadvantaged people and to their better-off neighbours about the value in which it holds our poorest citizens.

6.3. Leisure Environments

In their study of community attitudes to deprivation in Australia, Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths (2008) found that more than nine in ten respondents from the general community agreed that children should have a safe outdoor space to play at or near home, and should have access to a local park or play area for children. Young people we talked to were concerned with the lack of availability of, and accessibility to, leisure environments,

including green space, play equipment, sporting teams, sporting fields and other facilities such as ice rinks, cinemas and skate parks.

Of the leisure facilities that were available, many felt that they were excluded from using them due to quality, cost, safety, transport and the authority figures working in these facilities. The poor quality of leisure facilities in highly disadvantaged areas (isolated pockets and region of disadvantage suburb types) was commonly mentioned by young people. Many of the facilities available were not maintained, forcing the young people to avoid them because they considered them to be unsafe. Bob (female, 13 years, NSW) described a park in her local area where young people should have been able to play as follows:

> *The first one has rubbish where the kids play... because where it is there is*
> *absolutely no bins so they should stick more bins around the place...the*
> *other one everybody drinks in (Bob, female, 13 years, NSW).*

Young girls were less likely to play in parks of poor quality. This finding is consistent with Karsten (2003) who found in her study of parks in Amsterdam that girls were less likely to play in parks that were in bad condition. Girls in our study were more likely than boys to be critical of the quality of parks in their neighbourhood. This meant that many girls (and vulnerable boys) were pushed back into the already overcrowded spaces of their homes.

Cost also factored into young people's ability to access leisure facilities. Where leisure activities were available, many households just could not afford the cost for them to participate. This potentially reduced the opportunities for young people to gain important life skills (Sutton, 2008). This was particularly common among young people of all ages who wanted to join a sports team. Many parents talked about the stress associated with covering these costs:

> *There is like football, soccer, cricket, there are things like that, but a lot of*
> *families can't really afford, because the big chunk of the rego, like you*
> *know, the fees they have to start off with (Sarah, parent, NSW).*

Often young people were just not able to participate. Anna suggests that basically there is no way around cost – if you do not have it your child does not participate:

> *Well that's what I said if you haven't got the money the kids walk the streets*
> *you know, and that's basically it (Anna, parent, SA).*

Many young people had to choose which sports to participate in based on affordability. For example, Tony (male, 10 years, Victoria) said he chose Kung Fu because it was cheaper than playing soccer:

> Interviewer: Did your dad give you a choice whether you wanted to do
> Kung Fu or soccer?
> Tony: *Yes*
> Interviewer: And you chose?

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Tony:	*Kung Fu.*
Interviewer:	Did you choose it because it is cheaper or did you choose it because you like it more?
Tony:	*I like it and it is cheaper.*

Often leisure facilities were not considered safe by the young people due to lack of maintenance, and were avoided by them. Tahlia talked about her safety concerns regarding a local park:

> *The end of my street, the park near the main road where there are all the needles. There is an area in [suburb] which is the bad area and all the drug people go there (Tahlia, female, 14 years, NSW).*

Feelings of safety were also linked to peer relationships in the neighbourhood. Young people were less likely to access leisure (and other) environments if they felt unsafe. Many young people talked about using the strategy of avoidance to maximise feelings of safety. These strategies included taking different routes, avoiding certain places (and people), staying home and never being alone. The most common strategy among the young people we talked to was to try to avoid being alone. For example, Aasim (male, 14 years, NSW) talked about avoiding an area where he felt threatened by peers and said that if he did have to pass through the area, he made sure he was with friends and family. Angie also talked about feeling most safe when she was with people that she knew:

> *I feel heaps safe because of just the people I know, I know everyone (Angie, Female, 14 years, NSW).*

The presence of parents also contributed to young people feeling safe. Young people frequently mentioned how their parents limited their access to different parts of the neighbourhood at certain times (usually in the evenings). Many parents enforced curfews, banned young people from visiting certain places, made rules about staying in contact via mobile phone, or overloaded young people with various chores at home so that they did not have to time to be out in the neighbourhood after school. One parent commented:

> *I don't think they are safe anywhere these days to be honest, I don't think, I have always been in that respect probably very over protective, my children have to message me when they get from A to B, they have to message me from B to A back (Marley, parent, NSW).*

However, 'over-protectiveness' often created conflict and resentment toward parents as young people wanted to maintain autonomy and independence by moving freely in neighbourhoods.

As the Mission Australia National Survey of Young Australians (2011) shows safety concerns about public spaces are common among young Australians aged 13 to 15 years. However, it is important to recognise that some of the events that underpinned the safety concerns of our study participants were well beyond those experienced by their better off counterparts. Regular public drinking in all the local parks, the regular burning of houses are

very real and somewhat extreme causes for concern. Furthermore, the push by parents to keep young people at home and 'safe' occurred in home environments which were often overcrowded and potentially contributed to intra-household stress.

In common with young people who Ridge (2002) talked to in her study of children in poverty in the UK, young people frequently found it difficult to travel to leisure facilities, particularly facilities outside of the local area (see also Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007). Reasons given by the young people included lack of public transport, lack of access to a car, and the cost of petrol. One parent talked about having to pull her children out of an activity because petrol was too expensive:

> *You know the petrol is so expensive, you know and my kids lost this but I just had to say to them look I'm sorry you know we just cannot afford it (Anna, parent, SA).*

Young people were often moved along by authority figures such as local council workers or police. Young people talked about feeling intimidated and frustrated with being moved on – again a common experience for young people, but one that exacerbates overcrowding in households. Some young people felt that they were grouped together and moved on regardless of their own behaviour. Fellowes talks about the stigma attached to being a young person:

> *Yeah they think we're all the same, we're rough, destructive and everything but we're not (Fellowes, male, 16 years, Victoria).*

These types of comment were particularly common for young people aged 15 to 17 years who were more likely to be negotiating public space in their own neighbourhoods where there was often lack of space for young people in this age group. Smiley talked about there not being any spaces she can go without being moved on by the police, particularly at night:

> *No places where you can go and play soccer without getting in trouble there, pretty much. 'Cos like at my age, when I'm 16, I like to go out more so at night time and do stuff, and we're not really allowed anywhere at night time, 'cos then people call the police. So we practically have to be somewhere, with our friends, at their house (Smiley, female, 16 years, Victoria).*

Another example of the lack of provision for young people was one public housing suburb where a park had been refurbished for children in the early childhood range. This was the only refurbished space in the whole neighbourhood. Other public spaces such as a skate park were in bad need of maintenance and were covered with broken glass. The early childhood park quickly became a space used by adults for drinking and it too became covered with broken glass. As a result, the park was not used by parents with young children, or by children in the middle years, or by youth. None of the young people had a space of their own with age appropriate activities. While it is easy to see the frustration of local authorities who refurbished the early childhood space, it was short-sighted to assume that other age ranges

did not also need a decent well maintained public space in this context of very limited private space.

These experiences are similar to those recorded by Morrow (2001), who found in her study of young people in England that they also talked about being excluded by authority figures. Young people were not able to play or do the activities that were typical of their age, and were not able to play ball games in communal green areas.

6.4. Learning Environments

Young people's desire for environments that were 'well presented' and not vandalised extended into the schooling arena (the experience of schooling itself is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8). Where learning environments were poorly maintained, young people were less likely to articulate a strong sense of themselves as learners and often communicated a lack of self esteem, creating a self perpetuating cycle of disrespect for learning environments.

With a few exceptions, young people who attended schools were environments were well maintained tended to report positive experiences of school and those who attended poorly maintained environments tended to be dissatisfied with school. It is important to note that the highest level of dissatisfaction was expressed by young people who attended residualised schools in areas of concentrated disadvantage (in isolated pocket and region of disadvantage suburb types). However, our sampling strategy did not include any consideration of the quality of schools so the following discussion pertains to schooling environments in a general way and does not relate to schools in certain suburb types.

The quality of the toilets in schools was very important to young people and toilet blocks were clearly a key site where vandalism was carried out and was a central theme in interviews. In a number of schools, young people told us their toilets were in a bad state of disrepair and that this affected how they felt at school.

> *I want them to you know; rebuild the toilets because there is tag everywhere there is no toilet seat (Malaki, male, 17 years, NSW).*

> *They [have] more graffiti over them and everything and sometimes you will find that Year 7s are not coping well and they've gone through and just chucked toilet paper everywhere (Sarah, female, 17 years, NSW).*

As a result of the poor state of the toilets, a number of young people (particularly girls) chose to go home to use the toilet rather than use the toilet at school. In many cases young people who left to use the toilets at home never came back to school. In other words, the quality of the physical learning environment pushed young people into other environments:

> *Like if I really needed to go and I didn't want to go to the school ones I got a lunch pass and went home or if they wouldn't let me I'd just wouldn't go to the toilet (Riley, female, 14 years, NSW).*

> *When they go home they just jig (Riley, female, 14 years, NSW)*

Young people's parents were also frustrated by the lack of access to the toilets (they were often boarded up) and as a result, many gave permission for their children to come home to use the toilet. This was a cause for conflict and frustration between young people, parents and teachers. Young people and parents felt that school authorities who would not fix the toilets did not respect the student group as a whole. And teachers got into conflict with both young people and parents, because young people were leaving school grounds during class hours, and parents were giving them permission to do so.

While there was not any argument that some young people vandalised the toilets, there were conflicting views on why this happened and what should be done about it. In cases where young people told us these stories about toilets as being a big issue, it appeared that schools communicated the dogmatic and entrenched position about how to solve the problem to students and families (a line of thinking that could be similar to -'Let the students experience degraded facilities and they will learn not to vandalise') and were unable to engage students and families in a way that would communicate respect and solve the problem.

Degraded playing fields and boarded up buildings also drew negative comments from young people. In one school attended by a number of participants, local vandals drove recklessly on playing fields with the result students no longer had access to sports fields for sports classes or recreation time. The students felt that the school, police and local community should have done more to protect their environment and considered the school's failure to repair the fields an indication they were not valued. In a similar student vein, students commented negatively on boarded up or caged or unused walkways and infrastructure.

Where young people talked about poor learning environments, they indicated that being schooled in conditions that communicated a lack of self-esteem created a self perpetuating cycle of disrespect for the learning environment. As Sarah commented:

> *Yeah, because if they saw, I reckon, if they saw that it was better than they*
> *would treat it better (Sarah, female, 17 years, NSW).*

Generally, young people associated 'good schools' with the quality of the physical learning environment. For example A'lia talks about changing schools because it provided a 'bad education' because it did not have good facilities:

> *The teachers and the friends made it good, but like education wasn't that*
> *well. It was....the school didn't have that much facilities, equipment, and*
> *stuff (A'lia, female, 15 years, Vic).*

In this case A'lia did not describe her school as vandalised as many other young people did, just poor in facilities.

Many young people in the study attended schools where environments were well maintained and instances of vandalism acted on quickly. In one school, we interviewed several boys (13

years) who were on in-school suspension for graffiting school property. These boys were accepting of the punishment and other students from that setting felt very strongly that the school was right to take a hard line on vandalism (and absenteeism). Where young people felt safe and respected in their school environment they were more likely to express a positive experience of coming to school.

6.5. Summary Comments

The quality of everyday environments is important in communicating to young people their value in society. Those responsible for resourcing and shaping these environments can thus act as powerful agents of social inclusion or exclusion. Poor quality environments can have a negative impact on learning (e.g. young people not able to do their homework in the home), development of life skills (e.g. not being able to participate in sports and sporting teams) and sense of worth and well-being. Poor everyday environments limit the safe space available to young people.

While the young people in our study generally felt positive about their homes, these were typically characterised by a lack of personal space. In areas where there was room around the house, families often used creative ways of dividing and generating space so that household members had some privacy. Limited personal space impacted on young people's relationships with other household members and frequently 'pushed' young people out into public spaces in their neighbourhoods.

Amenities and safe public space was an issue for young people in almost all locations. Many described parks and playgrounds set up for younger children but not for 'youth'. Young people were concerned with availability and accessibility of leisure facilities. Poor transport services impacted on where young people could safely go and this further reduced the options for them.

Personal safety was a significant issue for many young people in almost all study sites. We know from a range of surveys that personal safety is an issue for a significant number of young Australians (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2009; Mission Australia, 2011; Tucci, Mitchell, and Goddard, 2008). While this study does not tell us how the safety issues faced by economically disadvantaged young Australians compares to those of their better-off counterparts, it is the case that the levels and frequency of threats experienced by young people in this study were very high for some participants.

The quality of school environments was also very important to young people. They were seeking learning environments which communicated respect for them as learners. Many were caught in cycles where they were frustrated with the poor quality of their environments and then found it difficult to treat the environment with respect themselves.

This research suggests the need for 'joined-up' action from a range of government agencies responsible for infrastructure in communities. Such action should focus on improving the quality of homes, and space available for young people within homes for those in public housing but also and perhaps more importantly, within neighbourhoods and schools.

7. Social Networks, Belonging and Obligation

7.1. Introduction

A focus of the *Making a Difference* study was to better understand young people's perceptions of the resources available to them (and needed by them) in order to navigate the opportunities they saw as important. One of the key insights from the interviews and group work that we carried out was that young people had a highly variable sense of themselves. Some had a very strong sense of individual agency and social boundaries, while others were less inclined to separate out their agency and experiences from those around them.

The possibilities young people saw for themselves, their understanding of their relative economic situation, and their views about routes out of poverty were associated with the social networks in which they were immersed. These networks had considerable influence on how they perceived the programs and opportunities available to them, at school, and in the wider community.

This chapter picks up on the discussion about social networks that was begun in Chapter 5 that looked at how location affects social network and other important influences on young people's outcomes and experiences. While social networks are to some extent shaped by location, they are important shapers of opportunities. The relationship between neighbourhood types and the participation patterns described in the Chapter 5 was that young people in locations with socio-economic mix were the most likely to have opportunities to participate broadly and to have cross-cutting heterogeneous webs. However, this mixing is not inevitable and our own findings concur with research from the UK which shows that socio-economic mixing does not flow from simply housing diverse people in the same area (Ware, Gronda and Vitis, 2010). Furthermore, as we will elaborate in this chapter, participants were often balancing their commitments to people in their social networks with other commitments in their lives. Stressors in their social networks had a significant effect on young people's capacity to engage broadly with others and to participate in learning activities.

In all domains of experience, young people's social networks mediated their experiences of economic adversity. These require substantive description and consideration. The participants in this study were asked to describe their social networks using a simple socio-gram tool (see Appendix B). Yet in spite of significant diversity in the size and form of young people's networks, the diagrams collected look relatively similar to each other in terms of the amount of paper covered. Those with very large networks drew symbols to mean groups of people and those with very small networks covered the page with 'large' writing and added pets and other doodles. Nonetheless, the instrument allowed researchers to gather clear information on young people's social networks. The tendency to fill in the paper regardless of the density of social networks speaks to the importance of solid networks in young people's lives.

This chapter discusses the insights gained from the socio-grams that the young people drew, and information they provided in the interviews as a whole to consider how different levels and types of social capital shape their experiences of economic adversity and social inclusion.

7.2. Webs of Affiliation

There is a substantial literature that explores the characteristics of different types of social networks and types of social capital that characterise social networks. In brief, social capital is a concept designed to capture the normative and structural properties of various social networks, including perceptions of what constitutes membership and non-membership (Bourdieu, 2010; Coleman, 1990; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 2000). It does so by distinguishing between informal, localised, and inward-looking 'bonding' connections, and broader, outward looking, formal 'bridging' connections (Putnam, 2000). Economic geography concerned with labour market engagement tends to deploy a dichotomous approach to social networks, characterised by *tightly connected inward-looking webs* and *cross-cutting heterogeneous outward looking webs*.

Tightly connected webs of affiliation, where members are interconnected with strong ties, offer shared values, norms and institutions, social support and quality of life benefits (Cheshire, Gibbons, and Gordon, 2008). As briefly discussed earlier, strong group orientations between people bring positive outcomes, such as family/group support and sharing of benefits. These networks are relatively stable and durable through norm observance, harmonising communication strategies and informal social controls. These networks are considered to have strong bonding capital. However, these webs can be insular and restricting in terms of developing ties with people outside the network – the same ties that bind can also exclude outsiders (Narayan, 1999).

Cross-cutting heterogeneous webs are those characterised by ties that cut across ethnicity, gender, caste, class, wealth, religion, location or any other characteristics that distinguish social groups. These heterogeneous networks are an important route into the labour market and are unevenly distributed between people living in deprived and less deprived areas. Crosscutting heterogeneous webs are more prevalent in advantaged and less deprived areas (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Granovetter, 1973). These networks are considered to have strong bridging capital.

The weak yet far reaching ties that characterise informal heterogeneous networks permit the greatest social and economic mobility because they offer connections to people who may have different resources (Grabher, 2006). The information flows across these capillary-like associations give rise to new knowledge about opportunities and social processes. These webs of affiliation can generate possibilities for outward movement. These networks are considered to have strong bridging capital. However, unlike in tight dense webs of connection, they are not necessarily rooted in strong material and emotional interdependencies.

While these types of social networks considered in economic geography are useful analytic tools, we found examples of young people whose networks held both sets of characteristics

and who consequently gained the benefits of both, and also found examples of young people whose networks were attenuated and who did not receive the benefits of either type. For the purpose of keeping terms simple and consistent in this report we will refer to *tightly connected networks and to cross-cutting heterogeneous networks*.

7.3. Tightly-connected Networks

Young people with dense webs of affiliation defined themselves very strongly in relation to their social networks. Some young people were positioned in webs that were almost fully overlapping or integrated. Their household, family, church and neighbourhood communities were made up of the same people and few (if any) people in these networks did not have significant relationships with others in the network. Concomitantly, people did not appear to have any relationships with people outside the web. This level of density is most strongly associated with first or second generation migrant communities, and/or those with strong orientations to faith and to kinship networks. These young people had substantial amounts of what is described in the social capital literature as bonding capital (Putnam, 2000)

Young people in these types of networks tended to have stable households and to have moved comparatively little compared with many other participants. These networks were characterised by obligation and reciprocity – with money, non-monetary exchanges and social alliances. Young people in these networks reported spending the least money on school costs and leisure activities of all participants in the study. Furthermore, these young people were most likely to be engaged in high levels of solidarity behaviours in their local areas.

Tessa's story illustrates the complexity of belonging to a tightly connected network. Born in Australia, Tessa (aged 16 years) was one of four children in a two parent family of Pacific Islander background. Several branches of her family had emigrated to Australia and to New Zealand. Her parents maintained strong interdependent links with family in both their country of origin and in New Zealand. Tessa was interviewed first with all her siblings and then later several times on her own.

Tessa's socio-gram (Figure 7-1) was clustered into 5 different groups and each 'face' typically represented more than one person. Her immediate family is represented near and by the house, her four siblings and cousin have faces and the house itself is her parents. The next group in a clockwise direction was her church community. She described this community as friends, but did not name anyone in particular as she did with her school friends and cousins (next two groups down), some of whom were her 'besties'. As the interview progressed the capillary like structure of the social web became more and more pronounced, many people were represented in more than one group.

Tessa's family and extended family were active in a local Christian church, which was predominantly made up of people from her family's country of origin. Membership to this church community involved paying a tithe (typically 10 per cent of the household income) to the church, and participation in church events was central to the everyday routines of their household.

No one in Tessa's household was in paid work and the family maximized their income through different supplementary schemes including ones that supported schooling costs (from government bodies and NGOs). Money was tight and was distributed within the household and to family in their country of origin. Tessa and her siblings said they never asked to participate in school or social activities that required additional payments because they could *'see it is hard'* for their parents. They received $2 a week for lunch money and saved this up for excursions, school expenses or other activities. They also articulated a strong belief that the way money was distributed across the

Figure 7-1: Tessa's sociogram

household, church community and wider family was fair and for the good of all. Family holidays comprised of a day trip to a theme park.
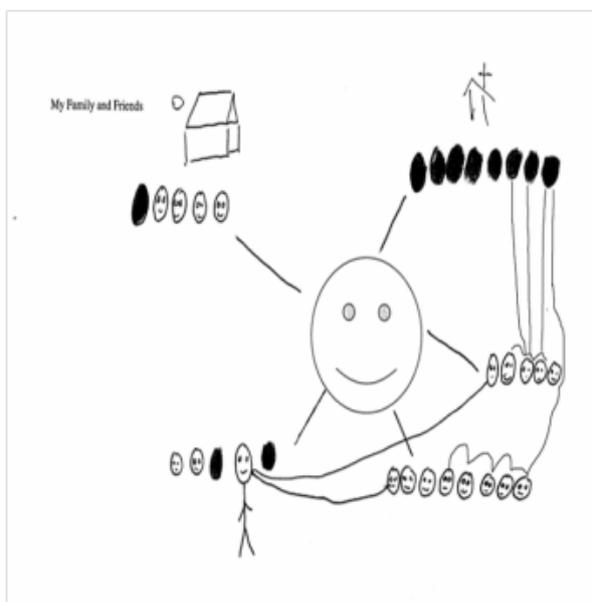
One of the members of Tessa's household was a cousin whose parents were in New Zealand. It was suggested this was because the local school met his schooling needs. This arrangement would also have helped the household financially as an additional school-aged child in the household meant that Tessa's family was eligible for a different level of financial assistance from the local school. While many other young people in the area where Tessa lived appeared to move houses and neighbourhoods regularly, Tessa did not describe anyone in her networks who had moved out of the area, and the whole network appeared stable.

For Tessa, the different domains of family, educational and neighbourhood experience overlapped because many members were part of the same webs of affiliation. Interactions with others in her social networks were frequent and sustained. Her parents held significant authority and expected a high level of compliance and harmonising behaviour from Tessa and her siblings. The tight connections and overlaps between these groups of people meant that Tessa and her siblings socialised with people who knew, understood and shared her world view and her experiences of economic hardship. Economic shortfalls and restricted participation was a norm among Tessa's social group, and the experience of poverty did not isolate them on a personal level.

The shared experience of poverty, however, did not blind these young people to the poor physical quality of their neighbourhood, school and housing. They knew other young Australians grew up in better quality environments and felt that stigma was attached to their area. Scarce resources in the family home and immediate neighbourhood dovetailed with negative attitudes from outsiders. These attitudes drew young people into tensions with other young people.

Tessa and other young people in her social network identified (and were identified by others) with place and this brought them into conflicts with young people from other areas.[21] Large-scale gang fights between young people from different suburbs in the region were a significant feature of the social landscape and many young people were affiliated with one of the local gangs. Many (but not all) of Tessa's friendship group belonged to a local 'gang'.[22]

Tessa suggested that when these young people were hanging around the school, church or neighbourhood they were friends but when faced with territorial hostility from other young people in the region, they became a 'gang'. She explained:

> *Friends they treat you more with respect and stuff you have fun, but gang they call you up every now and then. There's a fight going on you have to go.*

While she demarcated between her friends and the gang, there were clearly a lot of people who fell into both groups. Not everyone in her church group was in "the gang" but it seemed that this was mainly due to people moving in and out of the gang at various points in time rather than there being a group of young people in the church who never involved themselves in gang allegiances.

For Tessa, belonging to these different but closely connected webs of affiliation was complicated because she was being pulled in different directions. She appeared to be constantly manoeuvring between subgroups. Her parents insisted she attend church activities several times a week and be home to do daily household chores. Tessa was often looking for ways to gain more freedom and participate in activities with her peers and regularly 'wagged' periods at school or found 'acceptable' reasons to be home late. Parental and financial restrictions meant that she had few legitimate opportunities to participate in gatherings outside of her immediate suburb.

However, the neighbourhood peer group expected its members to participate in gatherings outside the neighbourhood. Moving in a group outside the neighbourhood provided safety, and many young people expressed a sense of obligation to be with their friends when they wanted to do this. Managing these demands was clearly difficult because Tessa and her brother both talked at length about these dynamics and juggling the demands of schooling, family and church.

Like many other young people we spoke to, Tessa wanted to be able to move beyond the neighbourhood but also was frightened of the large 'gang' style fights that regularly broke out. These hostilities were often on contested public (mall) or green space beyond the immediate suburb. Tessa was able to avoid much of these interactions because of her family's

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[21] These were not the only tensions, there was also many accounts of in-fighting among young people within the neighbourhood.

[22] This term is potentially misleading as there was no evidence at all that this group of young people were associated with illegal activity. It is this connection to illegal activity that is part of the Eurogang definition (see Bannister and Fraser, 2008, p. 98)

limits on her freedom. Occasionally, however, young people were called on to support their 'gang' in school time (by wagging school) or within a more localised radius.

These calls for solidarity were more difficult for Tessa to negotiate. She told us that in these circumstances she tactically drew larger than life accounts of the watertight regulatory dynamics of her family (whose authority was shored up by the church) in order to avoid these gang interactions. As a tactic, this relied on the compliance and solidarity of friends who were kin, and the misunderstandings of the school friends who were not within tight kin/church networks. Those living within the same dynamics presumably also tactically deployed these accounts of stricter than strict, never-miss-a-trick parents and maintained her cover when it suited them and teased her when it did not. She remarked:

> *My friends want me to go (to the fights) but I just say that I have to go to*
> *church ... I say no straight up...they think I suck up but that's OK.*

In Tessa's life, being known to have little autonomy as an adolescent allowed her the space to avoid peer interactions that drew her into broader antagonisms. She could avoid friends in the 'gang' when she needed to be affiliating with members more closely embedded in her church community:

> *It's not hard and I go straight to school and if friends [in the gang] come,*
> *then I walk up to my [church] friends that never jig school*

However, while Tessa was constantly manoeuvring between obligations she was not a victim to the tyranny of parental or peer group control and offered several stories that indicated she was an active participant in regulating 'gang' membership and activity. One story illustrated her friendship group's active exclusion of a girl who had not adhered to the cultural norms of the group.

Moving out of the social network that was the 'gang' was clearly difficult but not impossible. A year after the second interview when she described to us the machinations of friendship group and gang membership, Tessa told us she had left the 'gang', left *'street smart'* behind and become *'gospel smart'*. She had become one of the church friends that never jigged school.

> *It was hard for me because I was a leader of one ... for the girls [gang], but*
> *this other day I went to church and we were singing in a band and then God*
> *touched me and then I felt it and I started crying. And I was like, 'What's*
> *the point of being in a band when you're in a gang?' ... before I was bad.*
> *So that's why I dropped out*

'Dropping out' of the gang alleviated many of the tensions she had faced but also reduced the breadth of her interactions and her mobility.

Unlike the Rigmaster, Tessa's long-term goals were very unclear. In her first interview, Tessa claimed that she wanted to be a lawyer. Like others in similar types of social networks, she

knew professions that intervene in disadvantaged communities – police, lawyers, teachers and welfare workers – but little else. However, in the second interview a short time after, she revealed that she was '*just saying that because you have to say something*' and that she really did not have a work and career vision for herself or a broad knowledge about employment, pathways and possibilities.

She knew very few employed people and gathered job market information from her immediate network. Work for young people (and often their families) revolved around fast food outlets, and the local discourse was focussed on when companies were hiring and when they were not. At the second interview, she had identified she needed to get a tax file number and was in the process of applying for one. However, nearly a year later, Tessa still had no tax file number but was still talking about making an application in the immediate future.

Some young people expressed the need for guidance about how to best manage the challenges they faced and intergenerational networks played an important role in this regard. Young men typically experienced even greater pressure to engage in solidarity behaviours than girls. A number of young men from these types of networks looked to older men who they perceived had found a way to balance the demands of everyday life in a close knit community and attainment goals.

In one neighbourhood, a group of older Islander men had initiated a partnership with the local police to patrol the neighbourhood at night and try to keep the boys out of trouble. The older Islander men were able to connect with the younger men, as Linox explained:

> *I got pulled over by the [older men] before. I reckon it's pretty good. Because I don't know, like teenagers like my age, don't really like listening to cops. It's better for those guys to calm down a bit, talk to us, so we can listen more to them, and like, I don't know, there is a difference between us talking to cops, I don't know how to say it (Linox, male, 18 years, NSW).*

This young man's goal was to get himself out of the difficulties he was facing from his participation in the gangs and disengagement from education and training and then to take on a similar role with other young men coming up through the ranks.

Young people from families active in cash and exchange economies also described tightly connected webs. Here, young men also had tight social networks made up of kin and those they knew from their faith based communities. Like their counterparts from tightly connected networks in predominantly unemployed communities, these young people secured neighbourhood level safety through solidarity behaviours that maintained and empowered these networks. The young men we spoke to from these communities looked to male relatives to gather information about work and generally to broker them into cash economies and economies of exchange. These young men were first or second generation migrants. [23]

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[23] We did not interview any young women from these communities, so cannot make any gender analysis of these patterns.

Aasim's (male, 14 years, NSW) lived in a lone parent household with his sister. His extended family contained grandparents and several uncles and their households. His social network was comprised exclusively of these relatives including his cousin who was his best friend at school. Aasim described ongoing tensions he and his cousin had with same aged peers who lived nearby.

His oldest uncle provided items for Aasim's household that were beyond the scope of Aasim's mother's pension (such as new clothes for the Eid celebration as was customary in his culture). This uncle also appeared to take responsibility for Aasim's financial literacy and other work-based skills. Aasim told us:

> *My uncle, I see him everyday. Yesterday I was sitting down by myself, my uncle comes knocking and he has a little chat with me. 'What are you going to do when you are grown?' I say, ' I don't know yet', and I told him I want to become a mechanic, and he told me, 'Okay I'll put you in as a mechanic but you have to be working Saturdays and Sundays*

According to Aasim, his uncle's mechanics business was a backyard operation with customers from his faith/culture based community from his place of origin. When asked about this business, Aasim explained to us the ethos of the business:

> *These guys, see, they help each other out – all under the table - that way everyone gets a foot up.*

Aasim and a couple of other boys in similar circumstances were clearly learning how to do business in tightly connected networks. They knew little about work and job seeking beyond what they saw in their families and their families were clearly passing on social capital within their communities that could potentially sustain small cash businesses. These young men oriented themselves towards school and their future workforce participation using information from their families rather than the information provided by schools. Our sample only picked up a couple of young people with this experience. These were all boys, so it is hard to tell whether this sharing of business capital within tightly connected webs had a gendered dimension.

One of the most positive features of these networks in terms of ameliorating economic adversity is that young people in tightly connected dense webs on the whole were relatively stable and expressed a sense of security in what were otherwise economically insecure circumstances. Bonding capital protected these young people from personalised stigma. They rarely expressed a sense of being individually visible and carrying the personal stigma that stemmed from doing without or missing out on activities and possessions that have cultural capital among their peers. The security these webs offered, however, was not transferable to other social contexts and indeed without carefully considered interventions had the potential to undermine their capacity to access other networks.

Young people in tightly connected webs characterised by economic adversity experienced exclusion from important domains of social participation with young people beyond their

immediate community. Active social exclusion and territorial violence from same aged peers were a barrier to education and subsequently the acquisition of employment skills or pathways to legitimated and transferable forms of employment.

These networks were most commonly found in Isolated Pocket areas where there was substantial social housing, although they were also evident in other areas where migrant groups had settled (Middle Ring Transit suburbs). These tightly-connected, dense webs of affiliation, were not only common among faith based communities, but were also evident where disadvantaged communities had been stable for more than a generation (this was the case in the Region of Disadvantage) and those with strong orientations towards cash economies.

7.4. Cross-cutting Heterogeneous Networks

Cross-cutting heterogeneous networks are those that provide access to resources and provide information from distant parts of the social system, beyond one's immediate and most intimate group of people. These networks are thus associated with upward social mobility (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). In this study, these types of networks were only found in Middle Ring Transit suburbs and Low Cost Mortgage Belts (see Chapter 6) where labour markets were accessible.

These young people and their parents had made clear decisions to mobilise resources to support heterogeneous networks by placing their children in schools with high levels of diversity or by ensuring they were involved in extra-curricular activities where they could meet people. Finding the resources to support these new connections was difficult for families on low incomes and, where this occurred it was often because families contained working age siblings who were expected to invest their economic and networking resources into younger siblings.

The Rigmaster is the pseudonym chosen by a 15 year old young woman who was living with her brother, father and his new partner. The Rigmaster remembered times in her childhood when her parents separated and she had no stable housing, and missed out on many items that are generally considered essential by Australian people[24]. She recounted an incident when she was ten and was too embarrassed to see her friends after Christmas because her Christmas present had been a stuffed toy from a key charity.

The Rigmaster had a number of clusters of people in her account of her social networks. Her household (described above) was at the centre of this network and she had a group of people from school, a group of people from her Karate class, and people she knew through her job, and her mother (with whom she had a strained relationship). Her involvement in a social network that revolved around her Karate club had enabled her to get her job in a fast food outlet.

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[24] As described in Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths (2008)

The Rigmaster was explicit in her determination to *"never be poor again"*. She not only had cross cutting networks that enabled her to access information and resources beyond her family she also had explicit understandings of how social networks assisted people to get out of economically adverse situations. This understanding was grounded in her father's experience as a trades person who had gone 'broke' but found a more solid financial footing through the support of friends in trades who had helped him find his feet.

In addition, she took stock of her mother's current socially isolated situation. She commented:

> *She isn't going to get a job or anything while she is sitting around feeling sorry for herself, not meeting anyone and doing nothing.*

While this comment captures some of the frustration and anger the Rigmaster felt towards her mother, it also reflects her belief that social networks supported the participation necessary to getting out of economic adversity. She saw supporting people to expand their networks as an important facet of caring for others. When her father was at a low point she had encouraged him to get out and about socially and this had led to his repartnering and was proud of the role she had played in this.

Throughout her interview the Rigmaster expressed confidence in her understanding of how social networks supported people to gain financial security. She believed in talking widely with people about what opportunities were available. She had developed her own clear vision for her future, from talking to her oldest brother's friends who were in the armed services. The Rigmaster was saving up for flying lessons that would enable her to get into the airforce. She saw this as a career choice that offered job security and with that financial security.

Once financially secure, she planned on becoming a teacher so that she could help young people through the types of hard times she had experienced. The Rigmaster displayed unusual levels of determination and a strategic futures orientation. The level of strategic thinking she demonstrated throughout her interview was enhanced by knowledge she had gained through her contact with others who had different experiences of workforce participation to those held in her immediate family.

These additive expansive webs were the exception rather than the rule across the study in young people's accounts of their social networks. The young people who described what we refer to as bridging capital came from families who were in work and these networks clearly led to opportunities for young people to earn money and to develop a broader picture of employment possibilities. They were only evident in Middle Ring Transit suburbs and Low Cost Mortgage Belts where there were reasonable levels of employment among the population.

7.5. Co-existing Cross-cutting Heterogeneous and Tightly Connected Networks

Our sample included several young people whose social networks offered both bonding and bridging capital associated with crosscutting heterogeneous webs and tightly connected webs

respectively. These young people had complex experiences of forced migration that culminated in their current living situation in an area where there were high numbers of refugees from a range of places and situations.

This area had a particularly well-resourced and considered service system and offered services which promoted bonds between people from the same backgrounds as well as services which promoted social integration. It was not clear from young people's accounts whether it was this service system or families' social orientations that supported these young people to have such rich social networks, but it is clear that these social networks conferred advantages for these young people.

Diana (18 years, Victoria) described crosscutting heterogeneous networks but had come from a culture of tightly connected networks. The day-to-day interdependencies of this tight network had been cut through the experience of forced relocation. Since arriving in Australia, she and her parents seemed to have focussed on cultivating crosscutting social networks. They lived in one of the most culturally heterogeneous localities in Australia.

In Figure 7.2, she depicts (starting at the top of the diagram) her Sudanese family that included a mother, a father and 6 children. Not all had come to Australia and her father had returned to Africa several years before the interview. Diana told us her family contained more than twenty people (spread across several locations). To the right of her family, she depicted friends from her new school – emphasising the ethnic mix in her conversation, then below this - her friends from her old school – again emphasising ethnic mix. She depicted friends from parties, ten Sudanese church friends, and finally five groups of cousins.

Diana, her siblings and her mother had been living in a Middle Ring Transit suburb for the ten years that they had been living in Australia. A few years after arriving in Australia, their parents separated, and their father returned to the Horn of Africa. Their mother worked shift work as a nurse.

Diana and her siblings were expected to work in casual jobs as they finished high school and undertook further education and contribute to the household while there were younger siblings completing education. Their mother sent money overseas to support their grandmother and aunts. Their elder sister was studying Law at university and their elder brother who had arrived after the rest of the family was studying English at TAFE. Initially, Diana and her 15-year-old sister (the youngest child in the family) had gone to a Coptic school because their father was friends with the minister (even though they were Catholic). Earlier in the year of interview however, Diana and her sister Alia had changed from the Coptic school to a Catholic school.

While there could have been a number of motivators for moving schools, Diana and Alia (who were interviewed together) preferred their current school because of the social and educational opportunities it offered. They said they found the Coptic school they had attended too small and too insular. Diana stated:

Figure 7-2 Diana's Sociogram

> *Put all together it was like 300 students, like 150 at high school. There's no socialising. Like, we're not really doing anything because we've known them for so long. It's just like going home every day, so it was like a bit weird*

The Catholic school had cheaper fees, so affordability might have had a place in the decision to change schools (as may have religion) but the two sisters independently emphasised the size and diversity of the student body and the level of intellectual challenge offered. Diana aspired to '*something in science'*. She described her new school in the following way:

> *It's a pretty nice school. It's easy to socialise. Like I just came this year. I really like most of the Year 12's. There's like 200 Year 12 [students]. That's how easy it is, social with everyone. It's laidback, but then it's like, also you have to work really hard (Diana, female, 18 years, Vic).*

As depicted in her socio-gram, Diana indicated that she had a number of different networks; friends from both her old and new school and her church youth club. These networks were not connected to each other and had been developed over a number of years. In the telling of this story, Diana displayed an interest in and disposition towards developing additive crosscutting social networks but also in maintaining family cohesion. Their family shared clear ideas about trajectories out of economic adversity and a clear plan that involved coordinated efforts of family members. Each member would work to educate themselves, their younger siblings and to support some other family members to be brought out from the Sudan. At this point Diana and her sister envisaged starting their own families.

While there was a significant family expectation that children work and contribute to the household income and to the well-being of the broader family, their family did not expect them to have an inward-looking group identification. The restrictions that flowed from efforts towards family cohesion were practical time constraints rather than a form of cultural adherence that avoided mixing. Having time constrains did not emotionally or socially isolate Diana and her sister from other young people in the area as these time constraints were shared among many of Diana's friends. She explained:

> *My Indian friend, she finds it hard to go to the movies and stuff. And then my Lebanese friend, her family has a business, so they're like rich. My Ethiopian friend has a job. My Australian friend finds it hard sometimes, 'cos her mum's a single mum, too. And my Chinese friend has a job. My Irish friend has a job. And my Sudanese friends have jobs*

The experience of needing to contribute financially to the family income was not a source of stigma.

Diana's horizons were broad. She and her sister had a broad knowledge of job possibilities and both aspired to professions that required university qualifications. When Diana and her siblings were younger they had participated in extracurricular activities provided by their church (and possibly by local council). This had provided opportunities to meet others in situations similar to their own and to extend these networks outward. It is important to note that the area where Dianna lived was characterised by very high levels of ethnic diversity and the local council provided a rich array of resettlement and integration programs which encouraged both tight community bonds and bridges across communities.

These opportunities for mixing had contributed to their wide knowledge about what was available. Now as they were nearing adulthood they were able to research opportunities independently on the internet and confident in their ability to succeed within the Australian education system. We did learn from service providers in the area that local service provision was well resourced because of the needs associated with high numbers of refugees. The service system provided opportunities for people to network within cultural groups and between cultural groups. Provision of this kind was considered necessary because of the highly diverse population and the coming together of groups who may have had historical animosities in other places.

Social networks that combined the strengths of tightly connected and dense networks with crosscutting heterogeneous networks clearly support young people well. The two young women in the cases described above had access to good services that promoted crosscutting networks. There are also immersed in a milieu where crosscutting networks may have been easy to build. Diana's stories about her diverse group of friends suggest there were many people who had come from tightly connected networks.

In these networks of origin, she and her friends had learnt the skills of in-group harmonisation, obligation and reciprocity but the necessity of forced relocation motivated them to develop crosscutting networks. This capacity to forge new kinds of bonds while maintaining old ones may well be a gendered story. Again like our discussion about boys with tightly connected networks in cash economies, our sample size limits our capacity to tell whether this was a gendered story.

7.6. Attenuated Webs of Affiliation

A number of young people had attenuated webs of affiliation. In these webs, families had experienced significant levels of change in household formations, or they had reached a point

where their families and friendship networks are sparse. Where changes to family formations produced hostility, links between members were poorly maintained or fractured, family and friends often did not know each other and did not necessarily share relationships or even knowledge of others who were significant to the young person. Young people were sometimes the links between older family members who had become estranged. Here, when asked to describe their friends and family, participants named individuals, but ties between the people named were clearly precarious and fragile.

Where family and other social links are fractured, the households where young people lived often lacked the back-up resources needed for unexpected expenditures. Families with attenuated networks were often highly mobile because of the difficulties they faced meeting financial obligations or because of social fractures that can occur in families under stress. Frequent movement drained already scarce resources. There were a number of participants who came from these networks, and habituated responses to instability were apparent in the stories of those who experienced frequent upheaval and movement.

Rose, a girl of 12 from NSW and her mother Louise, shared their story which captured many of the challenges and protective mechanisms associated with those in our sample who were highly mobile families. Rose's social network is perhaps indicative of the attenuated social network that emerges through frequent movement and a tendency 'not to bond' in neighbourhood communities.

Rose's social network consisted primarily of herself and her mother, Louise. Peripheral figures included her Nan (with whom she had regular telephone contact) and her mother's friend (who her mother, Louise, described as a father figure in her own life), and Rose's father (who Rose had not seen for over a year because he was currently looking for housing having broken up with his second wife). There was no contact between Rose's mother and father except for infrequent maintenance payments. Rose did not name any friends her own age in her social network.

This lack of focus on her own friends stood out and was a clear feature of the narratives of young people who were highly mobile. Rose's mother Louise described herself as overprotective and said she preferred to be with Rose at home than to have Rose out at friends' houses. Louise typically went with Rose when she participated in neighbourhood activities at the local drop in centre and was considering volunteering at the centre when Rose was there because she '*missed her terribly*'. Indeed, Louise came along when Rose participated in some of the activities the research team conducted as part of our data collection such as a photo-walk.

Rose lived in the same suburb as Tessa, and as Tessa's case showed, a high level of parental control was not entirely atypical in this area, particularly for girls. However, Louise not only controlled her daughter's movement and activities very tightly, she also appeared to be poised for flight at any sign of tension in their lives. Louise described their financial situation as one of '*scraping by'* and '*muddling through'*. Louise rented all her household goods from a rental

company so that she did not incur moving costs when moving from one place to the next. Louise found the costs of school activities very difficult, she explained:

Louise: *When you are living on a budget and one that is as tight as mine, like even $5 out is like...'What am I going to do for milk?' I have a friend that helps me out sometimes which is good.*

Interviewer: With the cost of certain things?

Louise: *Yes, if I need something he will help, he has taken over the role of my dad.*

Interviewer: Budgeting is always hard.

Louise: *There is no point in budget, how can you budget on what I get.*

Louise and Rose shared a somewhat indistinct plan to move interstate at some point in the future with her friend. Louise anticipated that in a new place she would be able to find work. She perceived that potential employers discriminated against her because they would not consider applications from her postcode. She described Rose, at 12, as *'comfortable moving, doing something new'*.

This view of the positive potential of moving was shared by Rose who described the prospective move as *'an opportunity for us to start over'*. However later in the interview, Rose expressed a more negative view of constant moving when she stated that to have a good life *'you should pay your rent and bills on time'*.

This type of network underpins many of the biographies of our participants. These are laid out in some detail in the chapter about early school leavers, because while this group came from all kinds of social networks, many had attenuated social networks. Unlike Rose, Emily was clearly interested in forming bonds with young people her own age and her case illustrates how the combination of high mobility and few economic resources limits young people's capacity to buy into opportunities to bond with new groups of young people.

Emily was an early school leaver with a very small social network. Her socio-gram illustrates the tendency of young people to fill up the page of their socio-gram that was discussed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. Emily's narrative emphasised her loneliness and the lack of people she had for support, but her social map still appeared quite full.

Emily's sociogram (Figure 7-3) was clustered into two main groups; her family and her friends. Each was represented by several boxes around a happy smiley face with a tongue poking out. Her family was described using four boxes and consisted of her immediate household (her, her mum and occasionally her mum's boyfriend) and then three other family groups who did not live in her neighbourhood. The remaining boxes identified friends - a 'bestie' and, a boyfriend who despite being described as a 'loser' was included in the diagram.

She had aging grandparents who had supported her and her mother through some difficult times but who now required care and were moving interstate to be closer to other relatives

who could support this care. She had a best friend from primary school, but her friend had dropped out of school in year 8 and had been passing time.

Emily had moved schools many times, often joining a class when the school year had begun. Breaking into established networks was difficult and Emily did not have the resources to join school clubs or other structures that may have made these social initiations easier[25]. Emily rejoined an alternative education pathway and was working towards a Certificate 2 (a recognised equivalent of high school completion). This break from formal schooling and changes in her family situation left Emily with relatively sparse webs of affiliation.

Her mother struggled with bi-polar 'episodes' and over a number of years these episodes forced many relocations

Figure 7-3 Emily's Sociogram

(around the same region) and intensive periods where Emily had significant caring responsibilities. She had one long-standing relationship with a girl from primary school and this connection was very important to her even though, at the time of interview, she felt the friendship (and marijuana smoking that went with it) had a negative impact on her engagement with learning. Emily's most pressing concern was her social isolation.

These moves impacted on her engagement at school and sense of belonging to peer networks. Moving frequently placed the families of Emily, Rose and others under significant financial stress. These young people felt the stigma of not having the right things and of not being able to afford to participate in the everyday activities. The stigma of being poor was experienced individually and there were few emotional buffers. In many stories it is clear the effects of personalised stigma compounded over time.

Continuous experiences of missing/opting out can cause young people to become increasingly disengaged from their social networks. This sense of always being an outsider led some young people to express a deep and on-going sense of social isolation. However, for some that isolation brought a form of liberation from the stigmas and stereotypes that had formerly shaped their sense of self. One of the other young people with a similarly attenuated social network positioned herself within a non-conformist narrative that allowed her to recast her trajectory.

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[25] This is further discussed in Sectio10.3 'School's Just Not a Big Issue': Experiences Leading up to Dropping Out of School

I didn't care what anyone thought of me. I am the sort of person, I am who I am, if you don't like it, then shove it. I wore different things and I was different and I was weird, I wore all black all the time and heavy makeup as they call gothic or whatever, I didn't really see myself as gothic, I just saw myself as different and not everyone else and people didn't like it but I didn't care (Bob, 16, Victoria)

A common feature of these young people's accounts of themselves was a tendency to showcase their singularity. This sense of going it alone often rendered engagement with potential supports difficult even when they clearly aspired to secure a better future for themselves.

Other young people described attenuated social networks that were fraught with tensions and hostilities between family members. Here an ethic of interdependence – 'family helps each other out', 'family is all you have' was sometimes articulated, but complex and layered histories of hardship made close living and interdependencies untenable. At the extreme end of this category were young people living independently and disconnected from their families. In their stories about family life, schooling, and participation in their neighbourhoods, they railed against the structures that left them unsupported. They fore-grounded their own agency and self-sufficiency, and articulated a sense of belonging to and of themselves. While there were clearly too few resources, there was a kind of freedom in this self-sufficiency. These young people tended to forge an autonomous sense of self and were often quite remarkable in their capacity to take up new directions that were untried by their associates.

7.7. Summary Comments

In this chapter we have discussed how different types of social networks shape young people's experiences of economic adversity. Social networks are important not only for young people's health and well-being but also to educational attainment. Recent analysis of the Longitudinal study of Australian Youth data has shown that social capital is associated with increased rates of participation in education and training over and above the effects of family background, school type and geographic location (Semo and Karmel, 2011). In this study, we found a number of different types of social networks in young people's lives which shaped the forms of social capital they could accumulate. These were tightly connected networks, cross-cutting heterogeneous networks, attenuated networks and finally a combination of tightly connected and cross-cutting heterogeneous networks.

The advantages of tightly connected networks is that they provided material, emotional, and social protection to young people from some of the more damaging effects of economic adversity. First, they provided a bank of material resources to cover shortfalls and unexpected expenses. Secondly, young people felt they belonged to a community and this met many of their emotional needs for security and belonging. Finally, tightly connected networks protected against the personalisation of stigma.

However, there were also a number of disadvantages associated with belonging in tightly connected webs. Participants were involved in complex management of the competing demands from within certain elements of these networks. Young people in these networks could be called upon to demonstrate alliances in tension with other young people and these demands were often at odds with family values that demanded loyalty and a collective orientation on one hand, and staying out of trouble on the other. In this study, tightly connected networks were predominant in communities that were marked by active social exclusion (in terms of locality this was Isolated Pocket suburbs) and in communities with strong extended family ties and recent migration experiences.

In circumstances where active social exclusion was experienced, the loyalty demands of these networks precluded young people from forming relationships with outsiders. In this sense, tightly connected networks actively discouraged the development of the bridging capital associated with broad horizons and access to new experiences that stems from cross-cutting heterogeneous webs. As will be discussed below tightly connected networks can coexist with cross-cutting heterogeneous networks where there are resources to support alliances to be established across groups.

The advantages of cross-cutting heterogeneous networks are well documented. Networks built through community participation, including social and leisure activities, are also important for achieving wellbeing and educational outcomes (Edwards 2004). These networks have been found to support labour market mobility (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001). In this study, young people with cross-cutting heterogenous networks were more likely to have a strong knowledge of the resources around them, and most had some access to casual youth jobs and realistic aspirations towards employment.

We know that crosscutting heterogeneous webs that support labour market mobility are more common in less deprived areas (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Granovetter, 1973) and certainly the young people with these networks in our sample were only found in places where labour markets were relatively strong. It is important to contextualise the frequency of this web type in our sample with an acknowledgement that most of the study sites were outer ring suburbs, of which some were a fair distance from significant labour markets. Nevertheless, in spite of the limitations of this sampling, our findings support those other studies which assert that young people with cross-cutting webs are better able to make active and informed choices about education and employment (Furlong et al., 1996). The young people from these networks actively sought to expand their social circles as they saw benefits in broad networks.

The least frequent type of network in our sample were those that showed characteristics of crosscutting heterogeneous networks and tightly connected networks. It is important to reiterate that we sampled in areas where there were likely to be economically disadvantaged people (and hence weak labour markets) – areas where we were least likely to find cross-cutting heterogeneous webs and therefore even more unlikely to find networks characterised by strong bonding **and** bridging capital.

However, the few networks we found with tightly connected social networks that incorporated some cross cutting heterogeneous webs does suggest that there is nothing inherent in these network types that stops them from co-existing. Indeed as Diana's case illustrates, cross-cutting webs do not necessarily preclude tight family networks based on reciprocity and mutual support. Where these network types co-existed young people had access to the economic emotional and social support that could buffer them from the difficult economic times as well as the resources that enabled them to navigate towards more secure financial futures.

In some cases, local government policy actively supported both types of social networks, providing opportunities for young people to participate in activities 'within group' (such as sporting activities for Sudanese refugee youth) alongside activities that encouraged integration across groups (sporting programs designed to bring together teams from different enclaves). This is an important arena where public policy can have significant impact. By funding cohesion building *and* integration programs for young people on a local level, young people can be supported to develop strong networks which will then alleviate some of the effects of economic adversity.

The last type of network we found, which perhaps poses the most challenges to public policy is attenuated social networks. These were most commonly associated with young people living in fragmented families who had few social resources to draw on in times of economic adversity. These families were typically highly mobile and adults sometimes struggled with mental health. Attenuated networks clearly leave young people open to some of the worst effects of economic adversity. These networks contained the young people in the study who seemed to struggle the most with their sense of worth and have difficulty retaining hope that their circumstances would change.

Our findings do not suggest that the density of people's social networks were not in and of themselves produced by economic adversity. Some young people experiencing extreme economic adversity were supported by tightly connected social networks, while others were in networks that were eroded and fragmented. The stories from young people from these networks did suggest that adults dealing with mental health and other struggles were unable to develop or maintain social networks which left them and their children more vulnerable to the effects of economic adversity.

The density of networks did seem to affect the flows of resources and the buffers available in hard times. Furthermore, young people growing up in attenuated networks experienced disrupted engagement with school and neighbourhood communities and so were often isolated from peers. Their accounts suggested that they themselves were not strong at developing relationships with others.

The stories in this chapter highlight the impact of intergenerational and mixed age relationships in shaping young people's social capital. How can parents and other family members be better equipped to be present and active in young people's lives? How can families with multidimensional problems be better equipped to remain stable through critical

periods so that young people benefit from sustained relationships with teachers, peers and community members? How can parents of young people in disadvantaged communities better support them to develop the bonding and bridging capital that support well-being in the present and in the future? Social policies directed at alleviating economic disadvantage need to be responsive to young people's social networks and the factors within them that generate well-being for the young people in the present, and the factors that support them to secure futures with an adequate standard of living. Different interventions will be appropriate for different types of networks. To achieve this, urban planning, community, family, and educational policy needs to take a community development focus and be able to identify the strategies young people use to manage demands, strengthen the continuities between their experiences, and consolidate a sense of self that is safe and valued within the communities where they belong, and those where their dreams and aspirations lie.

8. Economic Exclusion and Educational Disadvantage

8.1. Introduction

The *Making a Difference* study's interest in schooling aimed to address how economic adversity colours young people's schooling experiences. In terms of the frameworks for exploring economic adversity that were flagged in the Introduction, schools are conceptualised as an important and potentially ameliorating factor in the constellation of overlapping forces that contribute to disadvantage among young people and families.

Schools are the main site where social policy interacts directly and universally with the lives of children and young people. The selection of data-collection sites in the *Making a Difference* study was not based on school profiles or quality, and except for five participants, the young people we interviewed attended government schools. Some schools were clearly offering good quality education, while others were not.[26]

We engaged school personnel wherever we could, so that we could see missing parts of the pictures that were being built up through the stories of young people and their parents. In several instances, those schools that had had very negative reports from our study participants (both parents and young people) were in the process of change and/or had initiatives that benefitted some groups in the school community. The project design meant that we had limited means by which to confirm the conditions they described.

Nevertheless, visible and discursive clues in the environment and in our discussions with teachers confirmed what young people had to say. Schools are in the frontline of young people's lives and are often the only universal service provided to them. In some communities, this places a huge burden of social service provision on these institutions. In our analysis of young people's schooling experiences, we seek to draw links between the conditions that fall within the realm of education portfolios and those that fall under other policy portfolios.

The participants in the *Making a Difference* study wanted to share stories about the elements of their schooling that worked and those that did not work for them. Many excellent studies of effective pedagogies with economically disadvantaged communities show that good educational leadership can provide better education and more integrated services (Munns, 2010; Munns, Zammit, and Woodward, 2008)[27]. However, schools are part of a broader service system which often does too little to address the needs of young people in out-of-school hours.

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[26] A few young people were not in any form of education, employment or training, and the schooling histories of these young people are explored in Chapter 9.

[27] Also see http://www.nationalpartnerships.nsw.edu.au/programs-and-case-studies.php
http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Resources/Documents/EffectivePartnershipsInPractice08-09.pdf

On the whole, the areas where the young people lived were characterised by a scarcity of other services and opportunities, such as adequate sport and recreational facilities, public spaces and housing, effective family support services, and access to adequate and secure employment. As documented in Chapter 6, poor facilities at the local area level meant that there was a significant number of young people (and older adults) with little to do and few spaces to occupy. Community tensions spilled over into schooling areas, either through people coming into school grounds and vandalising in out of school hours or through tensions grounded in neighbourhood issues that were brought in by students and played out in school time.

These shortfalls in non-educational infrastructure and services thus place an undue burden on schools in disadvantaged areas. They are already under-resourced for the whole-of-community approach which our data and other literature (for a strong overview see, Hayes and Chodkiewicz 2006) suggest is necessary to ameliorate disadvantage.

The level of school engagement on the part of the young people in this study was highly varied. Some young people were actively plotting their education and career trajectories, while others appeared to be swept along by the circumstances of their lives and expressed little agency in terms of their circumstances and learning. However, regardless of where young people fell on this trajectory, they consistently spoke of a desire to learn and to engage in education.

8.2. The Desire for an Education

Putting energy into learning is framed by a number of goals and values. Some young people expressed very ambitious, explicit and clear goals. 'The Rigmaster' is an unusual pseudonym chosen by a particularly feisty 16-year-old girl whose family had seen some very tough times in the past, relying on welfare organisations for food and other basic provisions. 'The Rigmaster' wanted to position herself in an economically powerful way. She channelled her earnings from a part-time job in a fast-food outlet into fees for elective subjects at school and skill-based learning outside of school.

She saw education as a key to her own success but also as a key to helping others:

> *I've kind of got my life set out. When I finish Year 12, I'm thinking about ... well, I'm going to join the Air Force. But first, before that, I'm going to go on a two-month trip to London and all that, London, and France, and all that stuff to open my eyes up. Have a bit of a relax, and then when I come back I'm going to sign up for the Air Force. I'm going to hopefully become a fighter pilot ... And then I was thinking once I'd done maybe my six to ten years in the defence force, maybe come back as a high school teacher, because I ain't going to take any crap from any students. I've seen the way people act, and I just feel like, 'Oh, god, I wish I was a teacher, I could go up there and ... 'Cos I'd have my reasons. I have my ways of knowing that ... I know how to make people be quiet, and I know how to get the message*

> *through. One of my teachers couldn't explain a question, and I asked her if*
> *I could, I just got it so I knew what they didn't get.*

While this young woman stood out in terms of her attention to her future and her engagement in the processes of learning and attainment, a desire to engage in learning in order to make a difference was echoed by many of the study participants. When a desire to learn and to be engaged in productive activities was met with resources that supported young people's interests and a positive response to the circumstances and challenges of their everyday lives, young people and their families were future-oriented and able to map out routes towards secure economic futures. When this desire to learn and secure a future was not well supported, the young people tended to have a shaky futures orientation – an orientation that did not always translate into engagement.

It is clear from the diverse stories of the young participants that engaging in learning is important not only from the perspective of educational outcomes and attainment, but also in terms of everyday well-being. There is a complex relationship between well-being in the present and the way young people imagine their futures on the basis of their educational outcomes.

The desire to succeed, however, is different from the belief that success is possible. We know historically that students from low socio-economic backgrounds have not been as attached and committed to education as their middle-class and privileged counterparts (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Mills and Gale, 2002; Munns et al., 2008). These precarious attachments have been linked to shared historical and cultural experiences of education that produce a lack of faith in its value and the returns on education. As Alloway et al (2004) found in her work on aspirations, attitudes and influences, students from low SES backgrounds had as high ambitions as those from high SES backgrounds (at around Year 10) but foresaw greater barriers to achieving those ambitions, including the capacity of parents to support them, financially and in other ways.

Across the almost 100 study participants, we also rarely found evidence that people did not believe that education was connected to jobs and more secure futures. When that lack of belief was visible, it was invariably in young people whose lives were embedded in a significant depth and breadth of disadvantage (either in where they lived, or in their family).

As others have observed (Peel, 2003; Thomson, 2002), schooling and its promises present complex terrain for families who have experienced disadvantage over generations. Mark Peel writes of parents raising children in poverty in areas of concentrated disadvantage:

> Hoping your children would be better than you or wouldn't make the same
> mistakes you did must often translate into raising them so they would want
> to leave. A fundamental part of the educational bargain for working class
> children after all, is that they must change, become something different and
> better (Peel, 1995, p. 149).

However, in the case of our cohort, we heard of parents (and directly spoke to some of them) who expressed what seemed to be a reasonable frustration that their children were getting a 'raw deal' at school, but we saw no evidence that parents were 'talking down' the value of education. On the contrary, we heard many accounts of parents working very hard to ensure their children valued and strove to attain an education and were complying with the requirements of school.

It is important to recognise that for many parents who had experienced negative schooling themselves, it was emotionally challenging to instil these educational values into their children. There is no doubt that many of the parents of the *Making a Difference* cohort were undertaking this emotional work in order for their children to have a decent chance. Young people, however, often made their own assessments about the value of educational investments and spared their parents the difficulty of making decisions about them.

Within the sample, there was a clear sub-group of participants whose families were not characterised by effective mutual care. These young people were less engaged in weighing-up the value of investment in education, and more caught up in the complex struggle to secure emotional and financial well-being in their here-and-now. This group had little energy to put toward achieving educational qualifications and economic security in the future.

Across the continuum of different family types, what young people needed in their present circumstances was often in tension with what they needed to secure good or even adequate futures. There were also young people whose immediate localities were perhaps the most significant factor in their engagement (or not) with education. For these young people, engagement in education was difficult because it would distance them from peers and family communities that were essential to their sense of safety and well-being.

Across these different sets of circumstances, young people's stories show that educational and intervention practices need to be responsive to the complexities of intergenerational relationships and of belonging to communities. Initiatives that are responsive to these circumstances will support young people's educational engagement more effectively than those that separate young people's experiences of everyday life into arbitrary and artificial silos.

8.3. 'It Costs a Lot to Actually Learn There': Schooling Choice and Economic Disadvantage

Broad educational trends show that young Australians from low socio-economic backgrounds are also disadvantaged in the school system. While students in Australia demonstrate a positive overall trend in educational outcomes and a relatively high degree of mean performance, the system remains far from equitable. Many Australian educational researchers have argued that the policy platform of schooling 'choice' is the key policy factor that reproduces socio-economic inequalities (Lamb, 2007; Thompson, 2000; Vickers, 2004). Vickers (2004) for example, argues that while Australian states and territories differ in terms of the managerial strategies, curriculum policies and structures implemented, all jurisdictions are shaped by the basic tenets of neo-liberal production of competitive educational markets.

The education system is segmented through the proliferation of government-funded denominational schools, the development of selective and specialised public schools, and the de-zoning of catchment areas. The educational landscape is characterised by some schools which are in high demand alongside others that are residualised. In these education markets, parents with the cultural resources to navigate the plethora of information about education possibilities and the material resources to fund their children's participation send their children to the schools most likely to bestow advantages. On the other hand, parents without these resources send their children to whatever is left over (Campbell, 2005; Croft, 2004).

Schooling residualisation is a term used to described a school that is 'hollowed out' to the extent that the financial, human, scholastic and social capital of the institution is so weak that it is essentially irreparable and must be shut down (Nous group, 2011, p.31). Figure 8.1, which is taken from the NOUS group (2011) report to the recent Gonski Review on School Funding illustrates how the policy approach of schooling choice sets schools with disadvantaged populations to spiral downwards in performance.[28]
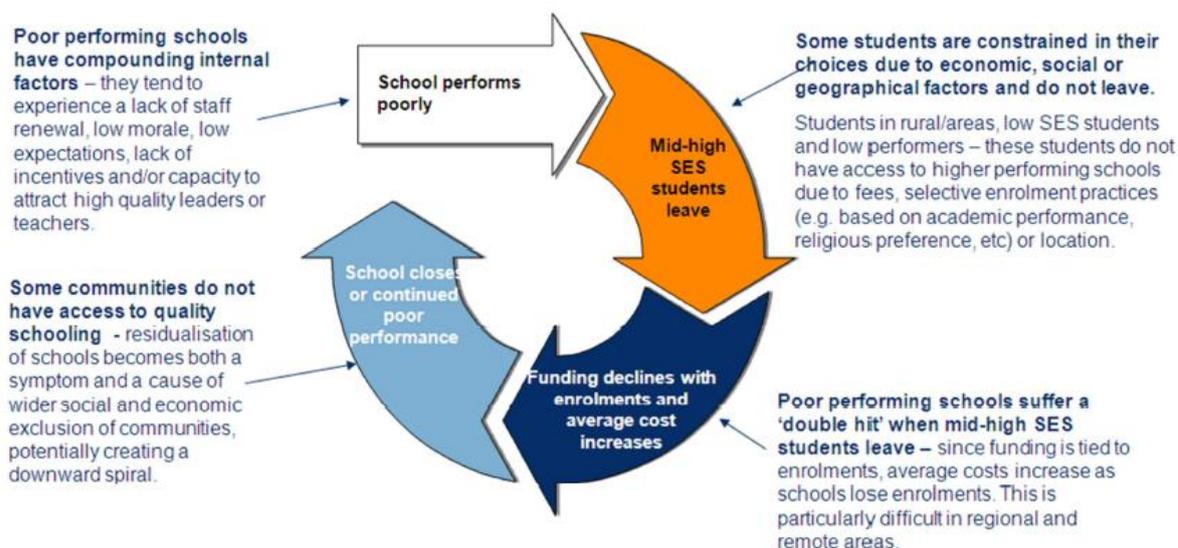
Figure 8-1: The Compounding Effects of Concentrations of Disadvantage

Schooling costs are often at the heart of the decision-making processes which people in disadvantaged circumstances make about the schools they attend and subjects they take up. Additional, voluntary fees are substantial and often increase at a higher rate than inflation (to which many parenting allowances and pensions are pegged (Bond and Horn, 2009). A survey of Victorian parents by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Bond and Horn, 2008) found that in 2006 the annual cost (of full participation) for a primary-school child was $3,624, and $3,928 for a high-school child. For low-income families this cost can represent a substantial

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[28] http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/Pages/PaperCommissionedResearch.aspx

proportion of their household income. Policy agendas do not adequately address or acknowledge the inequalities produced by macro-level policies of school marketisation, or even the direct financial burden incurred by families to facilitate their children's participation in public education.

These inter-connected elements of educational policy had impacts on our study participants. A significant number told us they had opted for schools on the grounds of what they knew about the costs of transport, uniforms, texts and subjects. These decisions were made by various players within families, and sometimes were made exclusively by young people themselves. Our data suggest that young people are not simply passive in this process, rather, as in other areas of activity, they are often working actively in their families, firstly, to make sure the money goes around, and secondly, to ensure that they stay with friends.

Many study participants were engaged with the financial burden of school costs. Some were quite articulate about the different costs associated with the everyday activities and various electives of the schools in the local region. A substantial number explained to us that, as they neared the transition to secondary school, they selected schools on the grounds of their understanding of the associated costs and the pressure this would place on family budgets.[29]

Tahlia (female, 14 years, NSW) was one of the participants who most clearly articulated the decision-making process around selecting a secondary school. She recognised that a 'technology' school in a neighbouring suburb was more oriented towards her educational aspirations than her local high school. However, the costs associated with attending this technology school were beyond the financial means of her family. Her mother had been on a disability pension since leaving school and was currently supporting Tahlia and her teenage brother. So while Tahlia believed that attending a technology-oriented school offered better opportunities, she also recognised that this was not a viable option for her family due to the costs. She stated;

> *I was going to go to Southern Falls High. Mum wanted me to go to Southern Falls but we couldn't afford like the bus passes and all that so we went to White Ibis Plains[30].*

Like many young people who took up second (but more affordable) options, Tahlia distanced herself from having unmet secondary school aspirations by claiming that the aspirations were not actually hers.

> *Well it was my sister really, who really wanted me to go there because she is all high in the sky and she doesn't understand it costs a lot to actually learn there ... every year you have to pay a fee of $100. She like, she wanted*

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[29] This was different in South Australia where electives appeared not to incur additional fees in the schools our participants attended.

[30] Pseudonyms are used for school names in this section for ease of reading.

> *me to go to girls' technology because she went there and she wanted the*
> *best for me. And because I was, I am the youngest girl, I am staying home*
> *with my mum, it is too hard to go over there so I went to White Ibis Plains*
> *and I've got heaps of friends there.*

Despite not being able to attend the school that was her first preference, Tahlia still aspired and was committed to completing year 12. However, like many others who attended her school, Tahlia found learning a challenge because of the significant numbers of students who were disengaged from learning but still attending the school. Her resolve however, was strong, and she stated she was 'doing well' at school:

> *'[I'm] going to get a good job. [I'm] not going to let different schools stop me'.*

In spite of believing her opportunities were diminished, Tahlia felt hopeful and had a strong belief in her own capacities.

Remaining loyal to peers and family was also a factor in the decision-making of some young people. One young man who was offered a scholarship at a private school opted to remain with his cousins and friends in the local school, much to the disappointment of his parents. These expressions of loyalty and belonging were particularly strong in areas where there were strong youth cultures of territoriality to counter stigma and social exclusion.

8.4. 'Who Cares?': Missing Out, Stigma and Adaptive Preferences

Having navigated into an affordable secondary school, young people then had to negotiate the basic and 'selective' costs that have economic impacts on their families. Tahlia captured this recurring theme when she drew attention to what it costs to actually learn within a particular school. Interviews with parents indicated that many had difficulty meeting the basic costs of uniforms, let alone the fees attached to elective subjects. These stressors on families played out in young people's lives even though many schools were flexible about uniform requirements and payment schedules:[31] As one parent commented:

> *They are very lenient in terms of what they wear for school uniform, as long*
> *as they look neat and tidy, they like them to wear the blue shirt for some*
> *reason. But like shorts [are flexible], today she had to wear her denim ones,*
> *there was no 'where is your school uniform?' no getting into trouble, that*
> *sort of thing. As long as they are clean and tidy* (Louise, parent, NSW).

While many schools had discretionary funds and 'leniencies', these types of 'support' sometimes carried social and emotional costs for young people. Rose (girl, 12 years, NSW) was anxious about going to school in the 'right' clothes. Her observation was that:

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[31] Some of the schools had other strategies in place to help families with the cost of uniforms, including offering second hand or free uniforms, payment for uniforms in instalments, and discounts for families with multiple children.

> *'[schools] don't consider the weather involved in drying clothes and some people can't afford dryers to dry them'.*

So while the authorities in her school may have been lenient on 'correct' uniforms, students themselves still felt the stigma of dirty or make-do clothes. Having the wrong clothes could lead to teasing or being ostracised. As Bobbie (girl, 13 years) observed

> *if you're wearing, like a trackie ... tracksuit something, they'll just go, 'oh, look what she's wearing', or something. But I don't care. I don't! But ... like girls at our old school ... [this girl] just wore what she could afford, like from an op-shop or something. And op-shops are good to get stuff, and everybody used to pick on her. And all she was wearing was trackie-daks and a top – who cares?*

Incremental payment systems for collecting fees for school activities were particularly important for many families. Some schools had systems in place to help students save up for extra-curricular activities and elective costs. Students could place money in a jar and pay for an excursion over time, and young people sometimes used their lunch or treat money in this way.

Interestingly, these types of arrangements did not seem to carry the same type of stigma as not having clean and proper uniforms because they fitted in with ideas of responsible money management and banking. At a different school, the payment system for elective sports was changed from one where families could pay in instalments to one where they had to pay upfront. Few families could pay this and the elective sport was discontinued. As Maya told us

> *Well I reckon they should have stuck to the old system, how we used to pay like every time we would hop on, when we would actually use the bus at the time, we would pay $5, but then they expected everyone to pay all at once, like $100* (Maya, female, 15 years, NSW).

While many young people were excluded from sports and subjects they enjoyed because of cost, these exclusions sometimes affected others who could afford to participate because there were not enough numbers to make the activity viable. Kuiga's father was in low-paid work and his mother garnered money from a range of NGOs and extended family to ensure each of her nine children could participate in opportunities at school and in one out-of-school activity. Kuiga (male, 14 years, NSW) could not use this money to participate in regional sports because his school had pulled out of the regional competition when too few students could afford to pay the transportation fees. Challenging competitive sport was really important to Kuiga and was one of the things that most excited him about school.

Young people made use of these systems where they could, and where they were not in place, or the amount of money required was more than the household could afford, young people said they did not 'care' to participate and adapted their preferences to their situation. This process of adaption allowed young people to retain their own and their family's dignity and to pass as someone who was not adversely affected by economic shortfalls.

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A number of parents expressed a sense of being stripped of dignity when they had to fight for provisions they believed to be part of the free public education system. Like the other parents we spoke to, Marley, a parent of three, talked to us about having to do without and to fight to provide the things her children needed to gain an education. While most schools had discretionary funds to support families in need, parents were sometimes unaware of this type of support and, as a result, missed out:

> *They do special funding which I wasn't aware of until like I really got desperate and I thought I can't say no to the kids but I just don't have the money and I went up to the school, They [names her two oldest children] were both in the same year and it was their school certificate. They came home and said, 'Mum if we don't pay for our woodwork, we can't get our school certificate', and I was fuming. They were really, really upset about it and so I went up to the school and I said I want an interview with the principal and I went in and I said to him, 'I don't have it and how dare your teachers tell my children that they are not going to get it because I can't pay for it'. I said how dare they, I was ropable, I was going to go to the Department of Education, I was going to go to Today Tonight, I was so angry. He said 'No, no', he said, 'we have special funding that covers that if you can prove that you are financially strapped', he said 'No, no we can fix that'. I said 'You are kidding me, aren't you?' He said, 'No'. I said 'I have struggled with those two boys for the last four years going through high school, going without so that I could pay for their stuff for school and you are now telling me that you have funding that covers that'* [Marley, parent, NSW].

The threat to her sons of not being able to graduate with their school certificate (in spite of having attained the qualifications) because of the family's financial situation caused Marley considerable distress. The 'he said, I said' structure of this account communicates Marley's incredulity at having to fight for money designated to support parents in meeting the costs of schooling.

In the face of these indignities, it is not surprising that many young people buffered their parents and themselves from conflicts and disappointments by opting for affordable subjects rather than those that aligned with their interests and aspirations. Sara recognised that not asking about elective options was a common tactic that students used to manage the tensions that schooling costs tended to produce in their homes.

> *At my school, some people don't like asking their parents for the money so they will just come and they will just stay at school and do school sport instead of going away or whatever* (Sara, female, 17 years, NSW).

School camps, where they were available, were the most commonly mentioned activity that young people missed out on.[32] Smiley (15, female, Vic) said that her school offered an interstate camp. However, the cost was too much for her family despite the fact that she had really wanted to go:

> *Yeah. It cost hundreds and hundreds, and we can't, obviously, pay for that. 'Cos the monthly fee or whatever, the pre-stuff you have to pay is $300. And my parents don't have that much money to give me* (Smiley, female, 16 years, Victoria).

These negotiations between parents and children were sometimes complex dances of permissions and refusals. Annabel's parents told her to choose subjects that she enjoyed and would be able to use in the future, but she chose the options that caused the least financial stress in her household. When asked about the impact of schooling costs on her household she remarked;

> *I think that it's pretty easy [for my family to meet school costs] 'cos I don't pick very expensive subjects, plus I don't go on camps because I don't like them, so that's saved my parents, like, $1,000* (Annabel, female, 16 years).

Schooling costs often determined what sort of subjects young people were involved in and often meant young people were enrolled in subjects that did not interest them. The underlying choices and behaviours are firmly rationalised through detailed economic and cultural consideration. These choices and behaviours challenge prevailing discourses that suggest there is a poverty of aspiration in disadvantaged communities.

The dynamics described above impacted on what happened in classrooms. School organisation, pedagogy and curriculum had the potential to interact either positively or negatively with the contexts of economic adversity that shaped young people's lives in- and out-of-school and in- and out-of-the classroom. It is clear from the young people's stories that their experiences of economic adversity could not be left at the school gate or classroom door.

8.5. Summary Comments

This chapter has explored the opportunities that young people had to change their trajectories through educational attainment, and the way in which economic adversity constrained these opportunities. We discussed how our participants paid close attention to the fees and additional costs involved when selecting their high schools. A significant number reported choosing schools that they thought were second best but more affordable.

The principle that parents have choice in school selection is not one that translated to practice for young people in the low-income families we talked to. Once in school, our participants

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[32] Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths (2007; Table 1) found that 95 per cent of those surveyed thought that it was essential that school-aged children can participate in school outings and activities.

were typically faced with more affordability barriers, where uniforms, elective subjects and excursions posed challenges. Most of our participants when faced with choices out of their financial reach performed the complex dance of adapting the identities they projected to the outside world, and claimed to not 'like' the things they could not afford to do. These adapted preferences allowed young people to save face and avoid the stigma of always being the ones to miss out on things.

It is difficult to know the extent to which young people who expressed 'not liking' things like camps, excursions, or subjects with additional payments internalised these views of themselves. Certainly, restricted opportunities narrow the skill base young people acquire and potentially disadvantage them in other arenas of education, in the workforce and in the spheres of civic and social participation. This issue of restricted participation is further explored in Chapter 10 as the cohort of early school leavers in the study all experienced restricted opportunities and this impacted significantly on their engagement in learning and on the social networks they were able to develop.

The interviews from this study clearly show that economic adversity restricted young people's school choices and in many cases forced them into schools they themselves thought of as 'residualised'. This narrowed the subjects and school-organised activities that they could enrol for, or engage in. Reduced interest in subjects meant it was much more likely for economically disadvantaged students to disengage from learning even if they remained in school.

Furthermore, our findings show that the resources that support young people to engage with education and develop a strong future orientation included those available at school but also stretched beyond education portfolios. Young people's families need greater financial supports so young people can make school choices that support their interests and desires to be educated. But families also need financial support so they can provide more stable home environments. They need more services and supports which promote health at a family level and which reengage older members of families in the education and training system in positive ways.

9. School Organisation, Pedagogy and Economic Inequality

9.1. Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the importance of schools engaging young people's desire to learn and secure a future free from the stressors of economic disadvantage. We mapped out the financial difficulties for economically disadvantaged young people in the school system and showed how it limits their access to rich learning opportunities. We noted that most of the study participants articulated a desire to learn. In this chapter, we use young people's accounts of their schooling to flesh out what they saw as adequate and good support for their learning.

We begin this account with a brief overview of the literature on effective pedagogical practices to provide a framework in which to organise young people's discussion about school practices. We then turn to what we consider to be one of the most important enablers for young people from low incomes. We report that young people wanted to feel their parents were listened to and respected by their schools - an issue that came up again and again in our interviews.

As we have illustrated elsewhere, young people from low-income families connected their own wellbeing deeply with that of their families, and feeling recognised and respected as part of these units was very important for them. Families too found it easier to have faith in investing in their children's education (both financially and emotionally) when schools communicated respect for them as people and as citizens.

We also explore the 'wow!' factor and identify the features of schooling that made our study participants excited about school, learning and their futures, and consider the things that made learning difficult for young people. One of the key factors that caused young people to disengage from schooling was the experience of not fitting in. For some, this was directly related to what they could and could not participate in, but for others it was related to the high levels of mobility that are associated with economic stress.

Finally, we explore some of the complexities of stability in areas of concentrated and deep disadvantage and how this can contribute to schooling disengagement if schools cannot effectively engage with the dynamics of young people's neighbourhoods. While this chapter focuses on young people still attending school it connects closely to the following chapter that identifies similar underlying issues intensified in the stories of young people who had left school early.

9.2. Classroom and Other Pedagogical Practices

It is perhaps no coincidence that several important educational studies that have examined the needs of young people in high poverty contexts have also used the rubric of *Making a Difference.* They include the 1997 Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) of classroom practices (Hayes et al, 2006) and the Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1987) *Making the Difference* study. Both of these studies explored the elements of schooling practice and organisation that could redress social inequalities. These studies found, as we do,

that social class, gender and family contexts shape the opportunities available to young people through schooling institutions.

The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study identified four dimensions of what was termed 'productive pedagogies', that is, the pedagogies that contribute to the enhancement of the academic and social performance of all students (p. 17). The dimensions identified in this work resonate strongly with young people's views about what works and does not work for them at school. These dimensions are:

- Intellectual quality – young people should be provided with a learning environment that challenges them intellectually;

- Connectedness – there should be a connection between learning and the 'real' world of the young people ;

- Supportive classroom environment – learning environments should be supportive of young people and have the structures in place to help them achieve; and

- Working with and valuing difference – recognise difference and offering all young people the opportunity to participate (see Hayes et al. 2006 for more detail).

Since this study was conducted, the productive pedagogy framework has been associated with other research and evaluations within the education system (Kapitzke and Pendergast, 2005; Keddie, 2006; Ladwig, Smith, Gore, Amosa, and Griffiths, 2007) and its key ideas resonate with other studies carried out in disadvantaged schools (Munns et al., 2008). This framework is useful for organising the joys and concerns young people expressed about what happened in their classrooms.

9.3. 'At least There's Somebody There That's Actually Acting for Them': Partnerships with Families

Student learning and motivation is nested in complex environments of expectations and one of the most important of these identified by young people is the expectations of their families. The literature on school-family partnerships is divergent and lacks any broad consensus. Policies designed to support school–family partnerships are seen to unequivocally enhance young people's learning on one hand (Muller, 2009), and conversely, to contribute to the reproduction of inequalities (see for example, De Carvalho, 2001).

Like disadvantaged young people in other studies, participants in *Making a Difference* wanted their parents and carers to be 'heard' by their school and advocate on their behalf.[33] Young people in *Making a Difference* had strong views about how their parents and families were engaged by schools as institutions, and their assessments of this was a determining

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[33] Vyverman and Vettenburg (2009) argue that young people attending disadvantaged schools value more highly than other students collaboration between parents and teachers through different forms of participation.

factor in their global perceptions of their well-being at school. It is important to note that young people who were satisfied with their schooling experiences typically were not attuned to their parent's level of engagement with their school. This was much more an issue for those who were dissatisfied with their schooling experience. This was evident in data collected from one of the focus groups we conducted with teachers, school and allied personnel at a school in a low cost mortgage belt.[34]

This professional group indicated that the parents of their student population were quite difficult to engage. This was seen to relate to parental work commitments and to low levels of educational attainment among the parents. This group of professionals felt that when the parents were happy with their children's schooling they left the job up to the school. Most of the data in this chapter relates therefore to the experiences of those attending residualised schools. In this sense, parental involvement was conceptualised by participants as advocacy actions.

Across the study, most young people reported that their parents had fairly low levels of schooling attainment themselves. Of the parents we interviewed 10 had less that year 12 completion and two were completing higher degrees at the time of interview. Young people's discussions indicated that their families were invested in them doing well at school. Many whose children were attending residualised schools[35], however, experienced high levels of frustration with the school system and told us their parents were equally frustrated by their attempts of advocate for better schooling conditions and practices.

The value added by respectful engagements with families was very clear in young people's accounts as was the damage incurred by interactions perceived as disrespectful. Furthermore, the respectful engagements that young people were looking for were often small acts rather than large initiatives or grand gestures towards 'school and family partnerships'. One young man Leroy (14 years), whose family had had a negative experience of schooling, expressed a strong sense of belonging in the school 'against the odds'. His described his school as 'not the best school but yeah it's good', but he liked it because:

> *I've had generations before me like my dad and all that they used to go there... like they know our family in that way so like from them knowing my family they're all nice. They're 'oh you're that boy's son' and all that. I like that feeling when they say these things. It feels good when they say that.*

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[34] [34]. Young people's accounts and observation indicated that the school offered high quality learning experiences to most students.

[35] This claim that the participant's schools were residualised is based on the accounts of young people themselves. Where they told us their school was a last option in their area for those with reasons to select elsewhere, we take the school to be residualised.

Leroy attended a school that was highly residualised (from his own account and from the accounts of other students). Most young people from this school suggested to us that their families were not listened to or treated with respect by school personnel. Leroy's story stood out amongst the negative stories of other students and attests to the power of being recognized in the way one sees oneself and the importance for well-being and a sense of belonging within a learning community. Leroy's family was disconnected and he lived with his grandparents. For Leroy it was important that people knew his family and where they came from, and this overrode the negative views held in his community about his school. Communicating respect for families and their values are an important platform for learning engagement.

On the whole, our interviews with young people in residualised schools indicated that young people felt their parents were not respected by staff. Many felt that their parents had no power as advocates and that their skills and knowledge were not validated in the school system. A number reported that when their parents advocated on their behalf for improved physical environments or learning experiences, they were not listened to. One example of this was the badly damaged toilets at one of the sites (mentioned earlier). Not only did young people perceive school personnel to not do anything to change the situation, they also felt that parents were denied a voice on the issue.

> *Another thing, the teachers don't listen to you at all. My mum and sister went up to school – the toilets there are disgusting because everyone smokes there - but no-one listened. Their excuse is oh well people tend to destroy the toilets so what is the point in renovating them.*

Through these interactions young people and their parents felt that schools perceived parents as 'inadequate' or part of the problem, rather than as part of the solution. Parents and families were typically only engaged by the school as part of disciplinary measures and when they raised issues of importance to their children, these 'partnerships' fell away. Young people identified with their families first and foremost in interactions between parents and schools. So when schools were perceived to be disrespectful of family members, young people distanced themselves from their schools.

We also talked with some parents about their engagement with schools. It is important to note that we only interviewed parents in three locations, all of whom had children attending what we classed as residualised schools. As we can see from Carol's experience, some schools interacted respectfully with families. Carol described approachable school personnel who she felt recognised her engagement in her child's schooling as supportive:

> *I don't so much do meetings, just if I need to talk to a school about something, I will just ring them up and just have a chat or if they need to tell me something that has happened to the kids at school, they will ring me. It is not like the kids come home in the afternoon and say this is what happened, that happened, so the school lets me know and they work around it and I help them out. Like if they are fighting or something, they will sit*

> *down with the kids and say you know the discipline and things like this is
> not appropriate that you do that in the school, you know with other kids
> picking on them or calling names and things like that* (Carol, parent, SA).

Carol knew her daughter was being pulled in several directions by peer loyalties and schooling aspirations, and this exchange of information helped her to support her child and feel effective as a parent.

Parents assessed the quality of their children's education on the approachability of teachers and other school personnel. One parent compared the school her child attended to another that she had previously attended based on the approachability of teachers. This made her child's new school 'better' than the previous one:

> *They are very approachable, like if you have a problem, they will stop and
> have a chat. Whereas [previous school] I think they are very closed, they
> have their little set groups* (Louise, parent, NSW).

These parental assessments of quality are an important component in building student faith in investing in education, particularly when young people are engaged in managing the stress of making ends meet in their families, and are highly active in decisions about material, intellectual and emotional investment in schooling.

Parents we talked to suggested that collaboration aimed to support learning in and out of the classroom was more prevalent in primary schools than secondary schools. Most felt secondary schools treated them as a nuisance or, worse, as part of 'the problem'.

Parental knowledge about their child was also rebuffed in many instances. Melissa, for example, talked about her relationship with the school regarding her daughter who was in learning support and how difficult it had been to share her knowledge about what worked for her daughter:

> *They're just, they say they're there to help them but honestly they're the
> most unsupportive school I've ever been to ... There is no communication.
> The head teacher is just she just gets a set and that's it, it's her way or the
> highway. She doesn't want to know about it if it's not working for her, it
> ain't working for anybody else. So there is no communication* (Melissa,
> parent, NSW).

Mills and Gale (2002, p. 7) have suggested that rebuffing parental knowledge is part of the way professional identities are constructed:

> 'Staff have little incentive to collaborate with parents, given that their claim to be
> professionals is seen by some to be undermined by giving credence to parental
> knowledge of the child'

This sense of being locked out of an advocacy or partnership role sometimes dovetailed with a feeling that bureaucracy is concerned with 'protecting its own' rather than offering equity

and justice to students. Melissa described a situation where her daughter was bullied, and the school was ineffective in addressing the situation.

> *So I went to the Education Department but then when I got further through the Education Department I found that the person that was running it in the region and the Principal at the high school and the Deputy Principal were all friends that played golf on a Saturday morning. So how can you fight somebody that are all friends, you know what I mean.*

Like other parents she described herself as someone who fought for her children;

> *I'm one of those parents I'll ask my kids what the problem is, they'll tell me. I'll then ring the school and ask to go and speak to the Principal or the teacher. I used to start with the teacher the people involved and then if I'm not happy with what they're telling me I'll go to the Principal and then nine times out of ten they end up getting the Counsellor and all that as well. But at least that way there's somebody there that's actually acting for them as well, so that's why I'll get them involved so yeah.*

Melissa's story showing the tenacity and emotional work required to continue advocating in the face of not being listened to was not unique among the parents we interviewed. While low-income parents may not be the only parents who feel locked out of engagement with their children's schooling, other studies have shown there is a class difference in the way advocacy attempts are received.

Reay (2004), who has conducted extensive research on mothers' involvement with their children's schooling, argues that emotional involvement in children's schooling is gendered but does not differ greatly by social class. However, she also suggests that working class mothers and those who failed in educational attainment themselves sometimes lack the middle class expression of detachment in the way they engage with schools about their children's learning. Teachers and schools value the accumulated emotional competence which communicates the ability to avoid being overwhelmed by emotional necessity and intensity. Thus: 'Class differences play a part of determining whether mothers could divert their emotional involvement into generating academic profits for their children (Reay, 2004, p. 64)'.

Making schools more accessible and supportive of parents can have many good outcomes for the young people themselves. There have been numerous studies on parental involvement with schools and the potential benefits to young people. Some studies have linked parent participation with higher academic outcomes for young people (Barnard, 2004) and with enhanced aspirations (Hill et al., 2004). There is a need for much more substantial research on parent engagement in disadvantaged schools which seeks the voices of students and their parents. How and what forms of collaboration enhance learning? What are the barriers to teachers implementing these approaches? This work can support faith in investments in education which potentially underlie schooling disengagement and underperformance.

9.4. 'Oh Wow!': Intellectual Quality and Connectedness

Many young people said that they wanted intellectual quality and connectedness in their classroom learning environment. For these young people, intellectual engagement could be achieved through a curriculum that connected students' lives and interests or, as Dylan put it, through their passions.

> *If they [students] were taught something that they actually feel passionate about they'd actually learn more because they like what they're learning about* (Dylan, male, 18 years, SA).

Where teachers made efforts to provide learning experiences that promoted intellectual quality, these were visible to and appreciated by students. A few young people we interviewed were involved in a program where several classes joined together for team teaching. Teachers informed us that this initiative was designed to support higher order thinking and collaborative, rich task learning. The benefits of teacher collaboration were visible to the students. They felt that they were being offered more imaginative and interesting work to do.

> *That one is my favourite, it's our new class that we got, it's just made [school] a lot better, and the teachers ... well, last week the teachers did a lot more fun stuff. Like we built huts out of sticks and stuff. It was fun and we were making houses, eco houses, so that we didn't have any pollution and stuff* (Nicole, female, 12 years Victoria).

In general, elective subjects (mainly art, sports and technical subjects) were nominated as favourites. As previously mentioned, in many schools these subjects often attracted additional fees so the young people who were acutely economically disadvantaged sometimes missed out on their preferences. The curriculum covered in elective classes was often connected to their experiences outside school. For example, these subjects often had material products which could be shared with and were a contribution to family economies.

In other words, elective subjects were often the subjects that were most likely to connect school content with the funds of knowledge young people brought from home (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992). Further, these subjects often also connected to the real-life working contexts young people could imagine themselves occupying. Students typically had good relationships with the teachers of these subjects and sought information from them about pathways through VET and apprenticeship programs. As individually selected subjects, elective subjects have the potential to resonate with the knowledge that interests the individual.

Curriculums that connect to real-world issues experienced by young people's particular social, ethnic, rational and gender nexus can have a significant impact on their engagement and educational outcomes (Mills and Hale, 2002; Comber and Nixon, 2009). The real-world issues of concern to young people are not limited to employment; they also emphasise social

relationships. Enthusiasm for authentic meaningful curriculum reverberates through the Rigmaster's description of a girl-only elective health unit:

> *We do sex education and all the stuff, contraception. Some of the girls in the class don't even know, like, what happens. Like, [the teacher] was just explaining, and one of the girls was like, 'Oh, it's probably easy if you get drunk. You can put a condom on and stuff'. But the teacher went and got these drunk glasses, and then made us walk around the room, and then jump and all this stuff. Then she got out the condom and said, 'Now put this on the banana'. And it was just like this [mimics the action] ... like we couldn't do it. And then one of the girls couldn't even open the packet. So she's just explaining that's why you shouldn't go out drunk ... you know, this is how unsafe sex happens, and it was pretty good lesson, I thought.*
>
> *It's something that we can all talk about ... like we're all a group, and we just can talk about it easily.*
>
> *It's all to do with the teacher and the way she explains things and stuff. She's pretty good. The fact that she's pregnant makes us more, 'Oh, WOW!', because she'll show us like six weeks of the stomach, you know the baby inside? It's really interesting and that. She's like, 'Oh, the baby's kicking!' It's pretty good* (Rigmaster, female, 16 years, Victoria).

This subject was clearly delivered within a supportive classroom context – fun, laughter and playing around were all acceptable and did not get in the way of the students' learning. The teacher was highly focussed on delivering content in a style that recognised and permitted students' own investments in the issues to be placed at the forefront of classroom practice. Students could express their thoughts, ideas and experiences and, though this, regulate their own behaviour and learning.

This type of opportunity for learning was too often missing from young people's accounts of school, but it is critical if schooling is going to engage young people who are dealing with adversities and complexities. A Hayes, Johnston and King (2009, p. 262) state:

> Through the practices and procedures of schools in high poverty contexts, teachers and school leaders can create opportunities for young people, just as surely as they can constrain them from doing things. In high poverty contexts, this means writing new scripts that prioritise learning over control – the kind of learning that creates opportunities in an increasingly globalised society, such as the ability to engage in negotiated action, open-ended dialogue, collaboration, problem-solving and multi-purpose writing. This is not the kind of learning supported by the scripts that are so pervasive in high poverty contexts but it is the kind of learning that is more likely to be acquired in resource rich environments and, once acquired, is more likely to guarantee access to the distribution of goods. Young people living in poverty are largely dependent on schools to provide opportunities to develop these kinds of

skills and attributes. Relational justice means broadening the range of pedagogical and leadership practices that operate in schools.

The scripts that were most pervasive in schools in high poverty contexts were typically described in terms of 'busy work' – work designed to keep students busy but with little intellectual challenge or value – without any substantive language or higher-order thinking in their classroom time. Young people found this type of curriculum boring and repetitive:

> *Class can be quite boring, sometimes. Like if the maths work is too easy, and I've finished it, and I'm waiting there for, like, another 40 minutes or so and there's nothing left to do* (Joe, male, 15 years, Victoria).

> *There's a book that we're supposed to be working on and it's just all about colouring in this picture and that's not fun for us. It's all about the body. Like it's got some good knowledge in it but it's just boring. Like they could make it a bit more fun* (Texas, male, 13 years, Victoria).

> *Just, there is more talk, heaps of talking and it is boring to sit in there looking at the teacher, just talking* (Malaki, male, 16 years, NSW).

> Interviewer: So can you tell me a little bit about school?
>
> Bob: *It's boring*
> Interviewer: What is boring about it?
> Bob: *The school work.*
> Interviewer: The school work, what about the school work is boring?
> Bob: *They repeat stuff (Bob, female, 13 years, NSW).*

Some participants had surprisingly little grasp of simple organisational terminology related to study and work, which suggests that teachers may have held low expectations of them as students. An example is in the following exchange involving a family group.

> Interviewer: So you get a project and you have to make a timetable? Is that right? Do you do it so you have a deadline, do they give you deadlines?
> Tessa: *What's a deadline?*
> Interviewer: Oh, when it's in next Tuesday. And if you don't hand it in on Tuesday you lose some marks.
> Tessa: *Yeah ... they bring it on one day you lose 25, for the next day 50 and the next day 75, four days you get nothing at all*
> Interviewer: [To her brother] ... And you don't have work with deadlines at all for your subjects?
> Tessa: *[Quietly, answering for him] ... No because he's in muck up ... he is in special education (Tessa, female, 15 years, NSW).*

It is clear from this exchange that neither students in mainstream classes (Tessa) nor those in special education (her brother) were being exposed to the basic terminology of study and work.

While the meta-language used in school reveals the level of expectations held for students, so do approaches to self-directed learning through homework. We know from other studies that in schools where literacy is low and young people do not have the support of family to help them, homework is often ineffective. To be effective it needs to be 'carefully designed and differentiated' for the individual (Lupton, 2005, p.600). It is fair to say that many young people experienced difficulties doing homework due to a range of reasons related to economic adversity. Examples include finding spaces in their homes to do homework or accessing support to complete intellectual and technical challenges.

Organisational approaches to homework also appeared to be ad hoc and poorly considered in many of the schools with a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students. Young people were often given homework of poor quality with little expectation they would do it, and little follow-up on the part of teachers. Young people felt that it was not 'worth it' and did not target their learning needs or interests. For example, Tahlia (female, 14 years, NSW) talked about when teachers set homework:

> When they do it isn't worth it. They don't explain it they just give it and flog you off.

In spite of ad hoc approaches to homework, some of these same schools collaborated with NGOs to run homework centres and programs which were appreciated by the young people who used them. However, these resources might be better utilised if schools had a clearer approach to homework and, as Lupton (2005) suggests, designed work that offered intellectual supports to individuals.

Against the backdrop of schools that offered curriculum of relatively poor quality, the disciplinary practices of individual teachers and schools were of significant concern to young people. Discipline appeared a more salient issue for students in schools where there was low intellectual quality compared with participants attending schools where the curriculum and pedagogy were intellectually challenging and differentiated to suit the cultural and familial knowledge young people had accumulated outside of school .

9.5. 'People Who Want to Learn and People Who Don't Want to Learn': Supportive Classroom Cultures

Discussions about discipline most frequently revolved around controls within schools (or the lack of them). Young people also drew connections between other dimensions of classroom experience such as intellectual quality, connectedness and how well the diversity of their experiences was recognised by the school. Many young people benchmarked good teaching and classroom practices at a quality level that was low by the standards defined by Hayes et al (2006).

This bias in the data towards disciplinary issues in low-quality teaching contexts reflects the generalist methodological approach we employed when asking young people about other aspects of schooling, where discipline was not an issue. We were not focussed on classroom discipline *per se* but if young people raised discipline as an issue that impacted on their schooling we followed their lines of thought.

When the issue of discipline was discussed, young people associated 'good' teaching with effectively supervised entry and exit from classrooms, the monitoring of noise levels, clear instructions, monitored work, and the clear punishment of non-compliance. Frustration with teachers who failed to maintain basic classroom cultures was a repetitive theme.

> *We hardly learn, we just sit at the table because everyone doesn't shut up and we hardly learn everything and we are always doing overheads. Everyone hates it! And if they actually do what they are told they might not have to do overheads. We never learn anything ... I am a bit slow in reading and writing and I won't be able to learn everything like if no one is quiet* (Bob, female, 13 years, NSW).

Bob felt that if there were fewer distractions she would be able to engage in learning. She expressed the hope that students might change and the boring work would stop. The logic of her thinking (echoed by other participants at the same school) suggests that dull teaching was accepted as an appropriate punishment for poor self-regulation. It is reasonable to assume that, when students in a school consider poor teaching an appropriate punishment for disruptive behaviour, this is an accepted teaching practice within the institution.

In this context it is not surprising that a significant number of young people limited their descriptions of their best learning experiences to accounts of classroom practice where external regulation, compliance and monitoring were effectively carried out.

> *Well everyone was heaps good and the teachers were like if you get bullied they crack down on you and if you did something bad they would put you in time out or something. It was really good* (Tahlia, female, 14 years, NSW).

> *You get a strict [school] and it is like a good strict. Out here, they don't care. They just don't care* (Rhianna, female, 14 years, NSW).

These sentiments were shared by other young people from other schools in other states and were not attached to particular types of suburbs:

> *I found that subjects with strict teachers who were likely to pull me up I was more inclined to go to them because I was more likely to get in trouble for it* (Dylan, male, 18 years, SA).

In schools where behaviour management was a significant issue, it was common for participants to offer us their unprompted views of the problems of 'disruptive students' and to share their thinking about how to address the issues. Many located the problem with the

students. George (female, 14 years, NSW), for example, believed quarantining individuals who had a 'problem' was a solution:

> *Put them in different classes, people who want to learn in one class and people who don't want to learn in the next and the class that don't want to learn will figure out that school is a good thing.*

While George perceived students to be the problem, she did not entirely pathologise the issues and believed the problem could be solved through students learning the benefits of school – specifically 'that it is a good thing'. Others such as Ryan saw the problem, which he owned as his, as one of pathology. These tendencies to locate the problem as a culture of not valuing education or as pathology, perhaps reflects the discourses which dominated within their schools and communities. However, this does not reflect what young people told us of their own desires to learn.

Understanding the issues in terms of a student's deficit (a contagious or pervasive culture of not valuing education or as a pathology) renders the schooling conditions of the 'misbehavers' invisible. The physical conditions of George's school were described by Tahlia (another student who did not misbehave) as follows:

> Interviewer: So tell me about your school?
> Tahlia: *It's really crap.*
> Interviewer: What's crap about it for you?
> Tahlia: *The teachers don't care what you do and there are holes in the fence and everything and they are not allowed to go on the field.*
> Interviewer: So they have got sports ovals but you can't use them?
> Tahlia: *Because a car came in and did skid marks on it and that was in December and we're still not allowed on it.*
>
> Interviewer: So you don't get to use it at all, it is not just at lunch time it's anytime. So the school has no sports activities.
>
> Tahlia: *We play on half of the oval but that is only for sport, we are not allowed on there other times. The cage is always locked, the cage door into food work, cooking and so we can't go through there when we are going to cooking, we have to go all the way round. It's annoying because you get in trouble when you are late to class and if you go through that door now you get in heaps of crap. No wonder everyone's crap.*

Some participants did recognise broad systemic issues as well as more specific problems. The turnover of teachers, which is often a feature of disadvantaged schools (Muijs et al., 2005; Prosser, McCallum, Milroy, Comber, and Nixon, 2008), was noted as an issue that needed to be addressed:

> *It is hard on [students] because you have a teacher for a week, like a term or something and then he leaves the next term and then you go through all these teachers. Because that is what happened to me but I didn't have the teacher at all, I just kept going until I got the right one* (Destiny, female, 11 years, NSW).

Staff turnover makes it very difficult for young people to develop relationships with teachers. In keeping with the findings from many other studies, young people we interviewed placed the relationship between themselves and teachers as essential to engaging in learning (Comber and Nixon, 2009; Mills and Gale, 2002; Muijs et al., 2005; Munns et al., 2008; Pomeroy, 1999; Prosser et al., 2008).

Young people valued approachability in their teachers and spoke highly of those who would take the time to connect with them and discuss personal, learning and career trajectories and strategies with them. This affective or care-based dimension of teaching was apparent in the two types of 'approachable' teachers young people described in the study. The first was identified in schools which had structured this type of student-teacher dynamic into pastoral care programs that were organised to take place during the school day. These programs clearly worked well for some young people. Young people at these schools consistently named their pastoral-care teacher as the person from whom they would seek support for a range of school and home issues. The second was where young people looked to the teachers who taught subjects that they were interested in. The teachers most commonly named were those who taught technical subjects such as woodwork (or equivalent).

Young people, especially those from homes under high stress, repeatedly noted the importance of an ethic of care in their schooling. However, when they spoke of this ethic of care, it was often woven into learning experiences that carried other important qualities including intellectual challenge and connectedness to their everyday lives. This interweaving of care, intellectual rigour and opportunity is critical for young people experiencing economic adversity. As Lingard (2007, p. 246) notes, 'pedagogies could be seen to be deeply therapeutic in their strength of care for students, but indifferent in terms of working with differences and making a difference in academic and opportunity senses'. Certainly, for many participants in the *Making a Difference* study, the relationships with teachers that were spoken of most highly were those that encompassed all these dimensions.

A number of participants attended schools that governed various types of learning programs under the one umbrella. These schools had special education programs within the mainstream school and students experiencing difficulties learning in mainstream classrooms could attend less formal classes for a period. The South Australian ICAN program is one example of programs that allowed young people experiencing difficulties with mainstream schooling the flexibility that allowed them to remain 'in school.[36] Other programs included onsite hands on

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[36] http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/

learning programs[37] where students could engage in outdoor building, growing and personal development activities while remaining a formal part of the school community. These programs were particularly important to young people as they saw themselves as staying on at school rather than dropping out of school and were thus able to retain a sense of themselves as competent and successful learners and students.

It is important to note that school personnel in study sites that ran this type of program spoke very highly of the programs but felt there were not the resources for them to adequately support the students with the most complex multidimensional problems. More than one teacher explained to us they only referred students to on-site programs who they considered able to benefit from the level of intervention their resources allowed. Students who needed further support were not referred into these programs for any length of time as they compromised the efficacy of the program for other students. These young people with the highest needs were 'allowed to drop out' of the schooling system in the hope they would be picked up by interventions run by other agencies. Furthermore, the view was held by staff that they needed an additional school counsellor who could liaise with other agencies but that there was insufficient budget.

9.6. 'It's Hard to Blend In': Working With and Valuing Difference

Working with and valuing difference, the fourth dimension of productive pedagogies, is critical to schooling equity for young people experiencing economic adversity. Economic adversity is inequality, and should not be construed simply as a difference in the way cultural practices can be constructed as differences. Many young people in the study lived in complex ways that were enmeshed in economic adversity. These complexities need to be recognised and accounted for within the pedagogical organisation of their schools in order for them to have adequate access to opportunities.

Social inclusion across ethnic difference was the way most young people initially considered questions of social inclusion both in and out of school. The study cohort included young people from many different cultural backgrounds and, generally speaking, young people said that they felt accepted and part of groups across cultural differences. We need to acknowledge that while we asked about inclusion, our primary focus was not to explore issues of cultural difference. Even so, the language of acceptance and harmony was apparent in young peoples' responses to questions.

Young people typically described peer networks that were culturally mixed and where everyone was accepted. Opportunities for cultural mixing were partly the result of geographical location, and there was considerable variation in the extent of cultural difference available to young people. While young people throughout the sample referred to heterogeneous peer networks, they did not always mean the same thing. In a number of cases it was revealed through socio-mapping that the young person's social networks were in fact

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[37] Hands on learning is both a formal organisation and a pedagogical term used to describe experiential learning. The term here is used to describe a pedagogical approach described by school personnel.

almost exclusively from the same culture. Some locations where we interviewed had very high levels of cultural diversity and in these areas young people did have social networks that encompassed different cultures of origin. Nevertheless they did perceive that they were mixing across cultures and that it was important to do so. Schools as institutions are no doubt significant drivers of these attitudes.

Differences are not only connected to ethnicity, and our interest was more closely related to the differences that are driven by economic necessity and adversity. There are two key types of difference that emerged in this regard, those associated with mobility and those associated with the territoriality involved in the peer cultures of life in deprived contexts.

A significant number of families moved house regularly – in some cases once or twice a year. Low-income families are more likely to move house (and school) than their better off counterparts (Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Sorin and Iloste, 2006). Participants who moved a lot typically moved within their region (if other suburbs were similar) or to other 'like suburbs' in other regions or states. Some of these moves were for strategic reasons but they were more often reactive.

Young people moved house because of their parents' employment-seeking activities, the instability of rental arrangements (sometimes not being able to pay rent), tensions and changes in family arrangements, or families not getting on with others in their immediate neighbourhood. Young people sometimes moved schools because they were unhappy. Poverty is strongly associated with high mobility due to the heightened costs of managing financial outlays with no financial buffers.[38]

Families' high mobility exacerbated the pressures of schooling costs and meant that the educational experience of young people was often disrupted. This could have detrimental impacts on young people's learning as they found the gaps in curriculum and the making of new friends stressful. For example, George (female, 14 years, NSW) moved four times because of changes to her family arrangements. She described the changes as '*hard but easy at the same time*'. It was easy because moving resolved issues that she had at school and/or home, but it was hard because '*it's hard to blend in*'. Blending in was closely related to her sense of safety and of belonging in peer communities.

Research indicates that high levels of mobility impact on schooling, particularly in relation to completing high school. One study shows that a quarter of the young people who changed high school two or more times between year eight and year twelve did not finish year 12 (Rumberger and Larson, 1998:21). Mobility is also a significant predictor of the level of educational achievement (Fisher, Matthews, Stafford, Nakagawa, and Durante, 2002; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Wright, 1999). Given the high mobility of families experiencing economic adversity, schools' organisational structures and pedagogies need to be more adaptable in order to reduce rather than add to the disruption that frequent moves

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[38] Lister (2004) calls this 'the poverty premium'.

create in young people's lives. (The issues of high mobility were most apparent in the narratives of early school leavers, which are further explored later.)

9.7. The Role of Peer Cultures

Peer cultures are essential for young people to develop 'the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the adult world' (Corsaro and Eder, 1990, p. 214). However, they can also have a negative impact on young people and their participation in learning. Young people commonly mentioned that their schooling was disrupted by other young people around them. For many young people, classroom learning was disrupted by the tensions that they experienced outside of school gates. Feeling safe was paramount to young people engaging in schooling.

In a number of the study sites characterised by high concentrations of disadvantage (Isolated Pocket and the Region of Disadvantage sites), it was particularly common for young people to form 'gang'-style alliances and participate in a range of territorial disputes. Often this happened where there was a shortage of space for young people to hang out. For many young people, the loyalties to other young people in these 'gangs' competed with the goal of educational attainment. For example, Maya talked about the need to 'back up' others in altercations at school, and the fact that it often led to suspension:

> *At our school it is like, if one of your mates got in you would like jump in for them, because it is your mate, and then someone will jump in because that's their mate, and someone will jump in. Or there is that thing that some people they told someone else to hit that person for them, but don't tell them it is from you* (Maya, female, 15 years, NSW).

Strong alliances based on territoriality and established through anti-establishment behaviours operated as protective mechanisms for young people. Where neighbourhood tensions were high and schools did not engage with these pressures, young people were likely to disengage from school because it was more important to establish safety at school and out-of-school than to focus on longer term learning outcomes.

Where protective mechanisms were not in place young people were vulnerable to bullying. Angie, for example, talked about not being able to attend school for a week because her brother was involved in an altercation with a 'gang' which could have had implications for her as his sister. She said her mum was planning to move her to another school next year.

> *I haven't gone to school this week because there's these boys that have bashed my brother, they bashed my brother at school and now they think like they've been saying they're going to get all the girls on to me and stuff. So I haven't really gone to school this week so yeah* (Angie, female, 14 years, NSW).

The issue of faith in investing in education is interesting with respect to disengagement in the face of pressures in peer communities. While both genders expressed the pressures, girls were

more likely to manage to juggle learning alongside group loyalties. Furthermore, those with high levels of determination (or high levels of faith in the returns of education) often developed tactical responses to pressures. Tahlia, for example, tried to deal with them constructively. She had had an altercation with another young person but had worked to keep that person (and his other allies) onside.

> *The cool groups they are all high in the sky and don't understand anyone else. They think they are the best and are always getting kicked out of class. ...There is this boy who is my friend and it is best to keep him as my friend because I have been in a punch up with him and best to keep him as a friend not something bad. He calls me a nerd because I do my work and he doesn't* (Tahlia, female, 14 years, NSW).

There was some evidence that agencies other than schools were working with young people to alleviate and resolve some neighbourhood tensions. In several instances, youth centres delivered programs which supported young people's well-being and safety with consideration of their neighbourhood environment through specialised programs which targeted sub groups and programs which supported the integration of subgroups. There was also evidence of some cross sectoral collaboration between these agencies and local schools. These were promising practices but in all cases personnel reported these initiatives were significantly underfunded and that they were ill-equipped for cross sectoral collaboration (where it was felt that schools had all the power).

In general, the schools young people in our sample attended did not appear to have strategies in place for dealing with 'spill-overs' of community tensions to the school yard or classroom settings. School responses to support young people to manage the complexities of their lives in and out of school were only apparent in one school in the study: the school with the lowest level of concentrated disadvantage. This school was able to monitor absenteeism and to conduct in-school suspensions so that they were able to have some control of the numbers of disaffected young people within the neighbourhood during school time. The school also had some autonomy over staffing and had employed a significant number of personnel with skills in counselling, trade- and arts-based pedagogies. This meant they were able to stream young people having difficulty with mainstream pedagogies into intensive classes where classroom organisation could be structured around their specific needs for short periods of time.

A number of studies have found that classroom cultures can interact productively with tensions young people experience out of school in areas of highly concentrated disadvantage and track the elements of practices that lead to these classroom cultures (see for example, Munns et al., 2008). Some schooling practices, however, clearly exacerbate the pressures on young people to the detriment of educational attainment. Suspending young people into the community intensifies the pressures young people feel, both in and out of school. Indeed, young people with nowhere to go during the day were more emphatic about the need to establish themselves as 'tough' and 'bad' in order to protect themselves out in the community.

9.8. Summary Comments

This study has captured a cameo of classroom learning that is not particularly flattering or instructive for teachers and educationalists. As mentioned in the Introduction introduction to this chapter, we did not sample our participants using the quality of schools as a salient characteristic. There is a significant body of educational literature that captures good practice in low SES schools. We debated sharing findings about poor classroom practices because teachers too often bear the brunt of blame about why our education system does not deliver equity.

The deciding factor in our decision making was the interest our participants had in sharing their stories of school. They wanted supportive classroom environments, a challenging, interesting and meaningful curriculum, and school practices and organisational systems that recognised the challenges they faced in their everyday lives. The fine line between setting high expectations and recognition of income shortfalls, low educational capital and low confidence in young people's homes, requires experienced, well-trained teachers and high quality school leadership, as well as high levels of staff retention.

Our data from young people and their parents supports current directions in policy that do not simply focus on young people in the school setting but focus also on engagement with families and communities. The negative impact of low socio-economic background on student outcomes can be reduced where parents can construct a positive role for themselves in their children's schooling.

Our participants (both young people and their parents) suggested that to do this, parents need evidence that their efforts to support their children's schooling and advocate on their behalf are valued. Our research shows that where young people were strongly connected to their families and communities they looked first and foremost to these people to assess investments in education, for information about education, training and employment options, and for learning support within and outside of school. It is important that schools engage families so there is better understanding on both sides of the transition landscape that young people have to traverse. Engaging with families who are educationally disadvantaged themselves can be difficult and teachers and school personnel may well be under-resourced in terms of their professional training to be effective in this practice domain.

Furthermore, policy that is focussed on a holistic approach to alleviating the effects of entrenched disadvantage on young people requires an integrated approach to service delivery in order to full meet care obligations to young people. Schools are a critical player in the service systems designed to support young people and there is a need for greater support for schools to work across the boundaries of schooling policy silos and to integrate their service more effectively with family and community development initiatives.

Finally, schools alone cannot change many of the circumstances that impact on young people's everyday learning. Local infrastructure and services provided by councils, housing authorities, and state and federal governments are critical shapers of local dynamics. These dynamics flow into schools, even when they are well fenced. The public spaces in

disadvantaged communities need proper infrastructure and maintenance so that residents have places to go and things to do.

Alleviating some of the pressures on public spaces goes some way towards alleviating the pressure on young people in out-of-school hours. As Thomson (2002) argues, improved infrastructure and community engagement provides better learning opportunities for young people outside of the school environment, and enables them to extend the contents of their 'virtual school bags' so they are coming to school with broader networks and skills gained through a range of organised activities. Education neither starts, nor ends, at the school gates.

10. Pathways In and Out of Participation in Education and Work

10.1. Introduction

Fourteen young people in the study were not in mainstream schooling. Of these, two were in special programs in mainstream schools, three were not in any form of education, training or employment, and the remaining nine were attending alternative schools. These early school leavers were recruited at four of the eight study sites used for *Making a Difference*. Two of the recruitment sites were small alternative schools, and we met most of the out-of-mainstream school participants at these sites.

In addition, two of the fourteen were in special programs because they were fringe users of youth services and had heard that we were interviewing young people (and offering thank-you vouchers). We also came into contact (through snowballing, and 'hanging out') with three early school leavers who were not formally in education, employment or training.

Table 10-1 provides a breakdown of this group of young people by the types of education programs they attended, the type of suburb they had grown up in and the length of time they were disconnected from education. Of note is the number of young people in this cohort who were highly mobile. These young people had often attended many schools. They were often not in schools for long enough for them to make any strong judgements about the quality of the institution and their accounts were frequently focussed on the settling in process rather than the resources which support learning per se. The complexity of their stories meant that we did not collect information about where they had been to school. Therefore, we cannot comment on the quality of schools they attended. Certainly, their accounts of second chance schools run by NGOs were positive.

Table 10-1: Characteristics of early school leavers

Type of education program	Alternative schools delivered by NGO's	Special education (State)	Not in education, employment or training	
Number of participants	9	2	3	
Type of suburb grown up in	Middle ring transit suburb	Isolated pocket	Region of disadvantage	Highly mobile
Number of participants	4	2	0	8
Length of time disconnected	Not been disconnected[39]	0-6 months	6 months to 1 year	< 1 year
Number of participants	2	7	3	2

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[39] those in special education programs delivered by state authorities)

Kitty te Riele (2011) argues that young people pushed out of school typically face two kinds of complexities – parallel and sequential complexities. Other studies on how young Australians combine work and education indicate the parallel demands on young people's time while at school typically have economic roots. Over half of 12-17 year olds combine part time work with full time study. For many of these young people, working is necessary in order to stay at school (Bond and Horn, 2009; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005a).

For others, the circumstances in their homes and communities impinged on their capacity to engage with school. The curriculum content and pedagogies of school offer little to support these young people to navigate through the difficult circumstances of their lives. Leaving school may be the only course of action some young people see to escape the tensions between formal schooling and the relational circumstances they find themselves in. While this course of action dissipates the tensions of conforming to formal schooling codes and structures it may exacerbate their everyday challenges, posing sequential complexities associated with securing an adequate standard of living and other pathways to well-being.

This chapter traces these parallel and sequential complexities of leaving school early through the stories of the fourteen early school leavers in the *Making a Difference* cohort. The earlier chapter on Educational Disadvantage and Economic Exclusion has already flagged many of the issues that lead to disengagement from formal schooling and in some situations to leaving school early. Here, we explore further the specific circumstances that led these fourteen young people to leave school early as well as the views of the eleven who had reconnected with formal learning.

This exploration requires a slightly different approach that involves sharing the young people's biographies in more detail. Leaving school early is typically a culmination of events, and understanding these circumstances requires stories to be told with history and context. Young people's biographies suggests that the opportunity structures which support young people to secure adequate employment need to be conceptualised beyond the structures that focus on educational attainment and transition.

10.2. The Policy Context

In common with many OECD countries, the Australian government is grappling with the challenge of how best to support a minority of young people who face persistent difficulties engaging with education. Many young Australians find it difficult to engage with formal education (Smyth et al., 2000), up to 16 per cent leave school early (Curtis and MacMillan 2008) or do not have a solid grasp of the routes from education to the world of work (Beavis, Curtis, and Curtis, 2005; Beavis, Murphy, Bryce,and Corrigan, 2004). Australian governments have directed considerable policy attention and funds towards initiatives which aim to keep young people in education, training and employment.

It has long been recognised that a one-size fits all approach to education does not work for many young Australians, and that young people need different combinations of academic, vocational, industry training, and second chance options. The restructuring of secondary and

post-compulsory education and training has generated a myriad of options and pathways for young people through education and training to ensure successful transitions to employment that are more individualised than ever before (France, 2007).

It has been argued that this myriad of options is most difficult to negotiate for young people from families with the lowest material and cultural capital (Evans, Behrens, and Kaluza, 2009; Evans and Furlong, 1997; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Wyn and White, 2009). Setbacks and failures (to secure employment, negotiate schooling pathways, or to accumulate, mobilise or activate resources) have dire consequences in families where resources are few and families cannot purchase buffers from the risks involved in taking up the wrong education or training options.

Staying on at school can be complex and challenging for many young people. School disengagement is connected to a mix of complex factors some of which are associated with particular demographics, including coming from a mobile or fragemented family. Others include the cumulative effects of a lack of fit with the institution such as a poor sense of belonging, poor student-teacher relations and negative attitudes to school (Curtis and McMillan, 2008; S. Lamb, Dwyer, and Wyn, 2000).

10.3. 'School's Just Not a Big Issue': Experiences Leading up to Dropping Out of School

It is important to note at the outset that not all of the participants who were early school leavers were articulate about the reasons they had left school or had (or had not) re-engaged with education. The following discussion therefore draws heavily on the stories of those who were most articulate.

One of the clear constants across the biographies of the young people we spoke to was that their engagement in schooling was strongly shaped by their social networks and the obligations that go with belonging in those networks. Policy frameworks need to better capture a more holistic approach to young people's well-being, including their well-being in their family, in the community, and at school. Educational institutions cannot address the significant levels of disengagement among Australian youth when they are narrowly focussed on educational or employment attainment because a sense of being able to attain an education is but one facet of well-being that is often premised on other aspects of well-being. If public policy does not adequately support the contexts where young people maintain and forge relationships, it will only be able to succeed for those young people from already healthy relational contexts.

The early school leavers we spoke to all described difficulties in establishing themselves as competent learners within mainstream schooling. These difficulties were underpinned by a variety of casual factors, which came together in different constellations in each young person's biography. Some described a sense of isolation within formal learning environments which was often a direct result of economic adversity and the high levels of mobility frequently associated with poverty.

For some, there was a critical bullying incident that occurred in a schooling context that caused them to make a definitive decision to discontinue with school. However, bullying events were also described by many participants who remained in school. The distinguishing feature of these critical incidents for those who left school because of bullying was not the level of violence and threat, but their sense of having no secure attachments to the institution, teachers or peers within it.

Some young people had secure attachments to one neighbourhood, but in the context of few stories of schooling 'success' to inspire confidence in schooling institutions, neighbourhood and family safety required constant maintenance and immediate safety was prioritised over learning. These young people often described a long slow a process of disengagement with learning that occurred rather than a single point where they 'dropped out'. For early school leavers, the stressors they experienced sometimes culminated in or were exacerbated by difficulties in managing their own conduct within the rules and expectations of educational institutions – institutions which did not appear to them to understand or be interested in the difficulties they were facing.

The common themes in young people's stories were a sense of being very unsafe and a lack of access to the resources and amenities that allowed them to develop safe relationships. However, the reasons that underpinned these circumstances differed. Most of these young people had clearly been disengaged from schooling pedagogies and curriculum for a long time before dropping out. They typically described mainstream school as 'boring' or that it did not resonate with the issues they were dealing with in other parts of their lives.

Linox was a young Pacific Islander man from a large, cohesive and stable family. He had left school early and at 18 was still hanging around his neighbourhood. He regretted his lack of qualifications and wanted a job so he could start a family.

> Linox: *Just the way they taught it. It just doesn't make anyone*
> *interested in it.*
> Interviewer: Was that book-based learning?
> Linox: *Yes, it was like, boring.*

Linox believed his feeling that classroom was boring was shared among his student cohort, as he suggests that 'no one' could be made interested. Many of the study participants who attended the same school communicated similar frustrations with aspects of pedagogy and curriculum. Not all, however, left school early. Linox's situation was also different to many of the other early school leavers, primarily because of the stability of his family. However, the point of commonality between his experience and other early school leavers was that he was caught up in escalating tensions outside of school and the school system failed to provide support through these tensions, or in many cases to even recognize the stress of the adverse circumstances in which he lived. We will return to Linox's story later.

The dynamics of school institutions were sometimes too difficult for young people dealing with significant complexities in their out of school lives. Schools did not address the

challenges that were most significant to them, and schooling pedagogies devalued the importance of their contributions to family and community life outside of school. Mainstream schooling structures could not accommodate non-routine demands. Young people were fortunate enough to come into contact with special programs designed for young people with complex lives, but most drifted out of school and then had to navigate difficult and poorly signposted pathways back towards education.

The most common antecedent to early school leaving among this group was high family mobility, in terms of housing, neighbourhood and household composition. For most young people, the instability of frequent movement interrupted their learning. They reported having to engage with a curriculum that was out of step with their prior learning, so that they found the work either too difficult or too easy.

Glen (male, 18 years, Victoria) for example, had grown up in an unstable family where his mother was subjected to domestic violence from various male partners. Glen and his three siblings moved in sibling pairs between different foster care homes and his mother's house (he had moved every nine months or so). He said his time in formal schooling was difficult:

> *'Because I moved around a lot, going to different schools I was always learning the stuff that I learnt at the old school. I pretty much did everything twice and it just got really boring and it wasn't challenging so I just didn't worry about it.'*

Interrupted learning dovetailed with the confusion and stigma of coming from unstable family formations. Managing these parallel complexities had significant effects on young people's engagement with curriculum as well as their capacities to join peer networks.

Many school leavers moved frequently. In Bella's case, her circumstances lead her to change schools every year from Year 5 to Year 9, at which point she left mainstream schooling. The complexities of her life tell something about the levels of family instability that many in this cohort were dealing with.

Bella was the youngest of six children. At the time of interview, she was living with her mum, three of her brothers and one of the brother's partner. One brother had schizophrenia and was on a disability pension and the other two were in education. Her brothers (and partner) moved in and out of the family home as they moved in and out of various short-term jobs. The house was crowded and two of her brothers slept in the lounge. Her father had died of a drug overdose when she was around nine years of age and since that time Bella had lived in many homes with various formations. She explained:

> *We lived with my dad for ages and Mum was with another guy. We didn't like him because he used to hit her all the time and so we lived with my dad. And then I don't know, my mum came back and then we moved somewhere else and then my dad died and we lived with my sister and then we lived with my Nan. I don't know, it's confusing I don't even understand it myself.*

Bella and her sibling were moved around between family members. She had started living with her sister when she was 10.

> *I was living with her and I was doing grade 5 and I did like two to three weeks of grade 6 there and then my brother Daniel he was like maybe 14 and she caught him smoking so she kicked us out to go stay with my Nan.*

When asked if she liked living with her Nan, Bella said:

> *No, I hated her. She's always bagging my mum out and because she's my dad's mum. And she thought my mum was like the one that got my dad on drugs, but it wasn't, wasn't anything to do with my mum.*

Bella eventually moved back in with her Mum at which point her relationship with her sister and her Nan became strained.

Bella had always been interested in doing well at school. She remained at her sister's house until the end of the school year in Year 6 even though her brother had moved on to her Nan's house. Bella's account of her mainstream schooling was measured. She talked about teachers who supported her, as well as those who didn't have any classroom control. She was clear that she had left mainstream schooling because of intense bullying from other girls rather than a lack of interest in school.

> *No it's just because like the girls are bitches and all that kind of stuff....Like the girls went to my house and everything. The girls went through my house and hit my mum...Yeah well I was friends with them when I first went to the school and then I now dated one of their ex-boyfriend and that was it. And I didn't know it was their ex-boyfriend and they just came and run through my house and hit my mum and broke her glasses and gave her a bloody nose and attacked me and broke a window.*

The notable (and worrying) thing about Bella's account of leaving school was her interest in educational participation. At no time did she indicate that she had been disinterested in learning. Indeed, as Bella's decision to complete year 6 at her sister's indicates, she remained anchored by learning in the face of family instability. In the end, however, she was worn down by continually having to break into social groups in new schools and she left school.

In this respect, her story stands out from the other early school leavers, who while also highly mobile, typically described frustration and a steady disengagement with learning. The other features of her story however, resonate strongly with others who lived in difficult and often rapidly changing family formations and households. In particular the experience of a critical bullying incident was common among girls.

We have discussed in other chapters the importance of participation in extra-curricular and out of school activities. One of the less obvious effects of the high mobility associated with unstable family formations is that moving house or school within the school year determined,

to a large extent, young people's social circles. The timeframes of organized learning and activities can be quite rigid and these timeframes can lock out young people who move neighbourhoods and communities throughout the year.

There are a range of prohibitive factors associated with out-of-school activities including costs of joining new teams, and level of accumulated skill and so on, but the key point here is that exclusion from out-of-school activities dictated who was available in friendship networks and what sort of activities young people engaged in together.

The stories from these young people suggest that constant movement also meant there were many young people they could not access in a new situation. The networks available to them were made up of others for whom the main activity was hanging out, rather than engaging in formal activities. Young people repeatedly described these newly established friendships as having a volatile quality, or one that drew them into what is often framed as anti-social behaviours.

Emily's story illustrates the way opportunities to form relationships she valued were curtailed by her circumstances and unsupported by educational institutions. Emily lived in a household where the organisation of daily life was subject to the ebbs and flows of her mother's management of mental health issues. She could and was committed to caring for her mother and remained in the household. They had moved often, so she had quite disrupted schooling and high levels of responsibility at home.

> *My mum has bipolar so I used to look after my mother and brother, even though my brother was older –yeah I clean a lot because I know my mum can't sometimes. I get angry sometimes because she can't do it and I am forced to do it, but I understand. She is always sick, she is just on other medication and she is always sleeping a lot, so I do a lot myself but it doesn't make me any different.*

Unlike several other early school leavers, Emily's intra-familial dynamics were not volatile, but her family of 3 (mother, brother and herself) could not secure stable housing which led to upheaval, disconnections from social networks and academic disruption. She had started her schooling year mid-term and had to break into friendship groups.

Emily did not have time or money to be involved in any activities with her same-aged peers and hung out primarily with a friend from her kindergarten years. This friend was in a social group that was '*smoking a lot of dope*' and while Emily did not spend a lot of time with the group, she and her friend took up smoking dope when they were together. By year 8, Emily was having difficulty with schoolwork, was increasingly socially isolated and smoking dope alone. As she moved schools these difficulties were not picked up by school personnel. She described her high school years as fairly lonely with the exception of a stable period at the beginning of year 11.

> *I made a couple of friends in year 11 and they ended up leaving and the rest were stuck up bitches. Then I dreaded going to school just because of that*

> *and some of the teachers used to piss me off. I could handle the teachers but just the social thing of it. I don't want to go back to school because I don't feel like I belong there.*

Like most of the other early school leavers, she found not fitting in socially more of a push factor than her academic achievements. While there may be a relationship between these two factors, none of the early school leavers connected difficulties with academic achievement to social integration.

Amanda's story is different from many of the other early school leavers because she described a typical middle class suburban Australian family that economically and emotionally fell apart, rather than one that was caught up in a cycle of hardship. She described her parents as increasingly struggling with alcohol and depression and finally with unemployment.

> *Yeah a lot of incidences happened, dad was an accountant a business manager back in the day, but mum got more and more depressed and ended up trying to kill herself a lot. So dad quit his job to look after her and now they live on Centrelink.*

She described the social and emotional fabric of her own life as loose and frayed, where things could go wrong, and she expended her energy on holding the threads of family life together:

> *When they drank a lot, I was always the one to grab the dog, Mum would be loose so he could run out and run away so I would grab the dog and she'd always start on dad. I'd always be the one to run out and hold her off of dad. If she tried to do something stupid I'd always be the one to go into the room and try and find her and wake her up and stuff ...I was always the one to keep her awake because I have a younger sister and she was just terrified back in those days. Like I was too but I still did something about everything.*

During her final year of school (Year 8) Amanda's sense of connection to school was frayed. She '*hated going back home*' and instability at home meant she was missing school and ballet classes (which she loved). She eventually dropped out of ballet classes and lost contact with a social network that had been important to her.

At school, she was frustrated and angry for constantly being in trouble for breaking 'small' school rules. The codes of schooling appeared insignificant and meaningless in the face of the pressing concerns she was facing in her home life.

> *Yeah detention for jeans instead of blue pants! It's like I wasn't concentrating on that when I left the house, I just want to get out of my house. But they don't take time. They would be like, 'You're wearing the wrong thing get to detention we're sick of this, rah, rah'. That's why I*

> *didn't function well. I just thought, 'No I don't need your crap, you're not my parents, I get enough crap from them'.*

In contrast to Emily where the teachers did not know what was going on, Amanda could identify several school personnel who were sympathetic. They included a detention teacher who offered emotional care in detention time and a school counsellor who connected her with a self esteem building group. The care element of these relationships with teachers was a thread Amanda held onto. In the face of a chaotic home life, however, these instances of care fell short of the type of institutional recognition and system that could support Amanda through her difficult home life. She was not provided with enough support to keep her engaged in formal schooling as a learner en route to the attainment of qualifications.

> *I don't know, yeah I guess school just wasn't a big issue to me. It was just something I had to do and what I did there was run amuck and I had fun and if I could go and have fun that's what I was going to do. Because I didn't have fun at home, I didn't have fun on the weekends and I didn't have fun learning at school.*

She started hanging out with a group of girls at school who were using a mix of drugs on a daily basis. These peer associations with other young people who were disengaged from learning (although not from school) had a decisive effect on her educational trajectory. A violent dispute with these girls left her feeling very unsafe and disconnected from peers at school. Amanda tried, but failed, to persuade her parents to allow her to change schools, and so she dropped out of school altogether in order to avoid the bullying that escalated after this incident.

Bullying was a significant issue for many young people and also contributed to some leaving school early. As Kayla (16 years) stated:

> *Us kids, we get bullied every single day at school and the teachers say 'oh don't worry about it', but it gets to you after 10 years, it really gets to you. You don't want to go to school...A lot of the kids at my school just have enough and end up leaving because the same people aren't equal.*

For a number of girls, there was a critical bullying incident that provoked decisive action to move away from school. In contrast, boys tended to drift away from learning and then from their peers who were still engaged in school, and ultimately, they stopped showing up to school, even when schools put in place mechanisms to arrest this drift (see p. 137 for a description of programs that were designed to address these problems and that we encountered in fieldwork). For some young people this worked well, while others appeared to be outside of the reach of the intervention, or the intervention was insufficient to address their needs at the time.

These patterns of disengagement from formal learning were common to participants whose home lives were chaotic or characterised by demands for care from other family members. Many teachers in schooling institutions gave standardised responses to the adverse conditions

of young people's lives, and focused on the transgression of small rules rather than on addressing the well-being of young people. While almost all participants with this trajectory could name individuals within educational institutions who showed compassion, they believed that effective interventions were beyond the remit of the culture of the institution.

The other type of distinctive challenge faced by several early school leavers when in school was associations with group affiliations and territoriality in areas of concentrated disadvantage. A large proportion of participants in the study led lives out of school that impacted adversely on their classroom learning. Many of these young people gave accounts of stable family formations living in poor housing and in neighbourhoods of concentrated disadvantage. While their home lives were stable, these local neighbourhood conditions created stressors for young people in and out of school hours, stressors which shaped their relationships with each other within schooling contexts.

Concentrated deprivation meant that desirable public space within the neighbourhood was 'territory' contested by rival gangs and often by older men in the community who also sought hanging-out space outside the home. This intensified use of public space produced an exclusionary inward push from residents from neighbouring suburbs and these areas were marked by strong 'us and them' discourses that operated between groups that were fairly close together on the socio-economic spectrum. As a consequence, young people were often under high stress in out of school hours.

The force of the threats experienced by young people from outside of their community meant they were continuously engaged in posturing that underscored both solidaristic and claims to respect. Strong solidarity behaviours were valued states of being and central to valued relationships for many young people in these communities. The value and function of these behaviours, however, were typically unrecognized within educational institutions and in conflict with their learning cultures.

Attention to these relationships between themselves and with outsiders impacted on their engagement with educational and employment opportunity structures. Linox who was not in education, employment or any form of training described the pressures to engage in solidarity behaviours as significant enough to close down any opportunities to engage in formal learning. It was clear that in Linox's neighbourhood schooling was secondary to peer and family relationships for many boys.

Many young people described poor quality learning experiences at their local high school (high staff turnover, a lot of teaching to overhead transparencies, poor classroom control) which may have accounted for some of the disengagement from learning. However, as one of the more articulate young men in the study, Linox drew our attention to the connections between in-school behavior and out-of-school pressures. He described a situation where engagement in school was in direct conflict with the territoriality pressures on young people in his neighbourhood.

> *Because for the boys, when you are in school, it comes down to gang stuff. Like, you have to compete with other schools, like you have got the top school, like the toughest school and the boys just, they just want to rip the school instead of like learning in school. They just want to say what school they come from, see who's got the toughest school, it's all about gangs and that. If you avoid it then you would just be nervous, you would be a girl, you just can't avoid that.* (Linox, male, 18 years, NSW)

Being tougher and rougher in the face of hostilities from older people in the neighbourhood and peers outside the neighbourhood took some effort. For many young people, boys in particular, the desire to engage with education in order to secure jobs was secondary in the face of the immediate and *relational* demands of neighbourhood life.

Linox's reference to the emasculation of any boy who refused participation in gangs ('*you would be a girl'*) offers a sharp insight into the inability of schools to generate authorized learning identities that are congruent with the identities compelled by the demands of relationships within families and neighbourhoods. The logics of these identities are in conflict and most young people chose immediate safety over long-term attainment, even though they, like Linox, typically aspire to secure, stable and adequate standards of living and rich relationships in their futures.

The push factors away from education were sometimes exacerbated by a sense of futility in attainment. Many of these young people came from families whose everyday struggles with employment and money, and with mental and physical health were daunting and exhausting. While young people almost always described their parents as wanting them to stay in education, they were also aware that their parents had often not benefitted from their own schooling.

> *People are brainwashed to think the same and be the same at school. I think different and it doesn't work out sometimes like school, like most of the stuff we don't even use and by the time I ask my mum she is like 'I don't know anymore' so you know, I'd rather do something really fun in my life and maybe I won't be rich or as happy but, I don't want to be programmed to be like everyone else, do year 12 and become nothing* (Natalie, female, 16 years, Victoria).

To conclude, these early school leavers typically expressed the sentiment that schooling and gaining qualifications was 'not a big issue' for them when viewed alongside immediate pressing concerns of family or neighbourhood life. Their pressing concerns were connected to several different types of situations. The first type included situations where young people had unstable home lives or had experienced a significant change in circumstances. The second was where local neighbourhood and peer group demands made schooling engagement difficult. Those in the first type of situation tended to be highly mobile, while those in the second were less so. In both cases, these circumstances meant that young people had diminished energy to engage in the practices schools took for granted (e.g. preparation of a

clean uniform or completing homework). Safety concerns were of paramount concern in their lives and educational attainment was a distant goal in the face of the immediacy of these concerns.

10.4.   Experiences After Leaving School

Leaving school early may have offered respite from untenable relationships within the temporal and spatial structural environment of schooling institutions, but it also threw up new complexities to deal with. Of the cohort of young people who had dropped out of school early, a number had held jobs or training positions (apprenticeship positions) when they first left school, but these had fallen by the wayside as they continued to negotiate difficult peer and family relationships and the sequential complexities described by Te Riele (2010).

The time young people had spent out of school varied between 6 months and several years. Even after 6 months out of the system, their confidence in gaining employment through the attainment of certificates was waning. Glen (male, 18 years), for example, had initially had an apprenticeship as a butcher but had gotten sick and discontinued the position. He then volunteered in a community café for about 8 months with a cohort of young people gaining work experience. He then went on to paid employment in a small business for a short time before the job was discontinued. As he grew older he was less and less able to secure a job and his most recent engagement with employment had been as a kitchen hand.

At the time of interview he was focused on developing his life skills - cooking, cleaning and budget management - and not on gaining employment or credentials. Glen felt that he was not yet capable of independent living because everything had been done for him in foster care.

> *'I don't know I've learnt how to cook and clean. I don't know do housework and jobs and that. But I just don't feel that I could do it if I'm living by myself like I would like neglect stuff and not looking after everything.'*

Leaving school presents a world that is relatively unstructured and, Amanda, too, started off in a relatively promising way but spiralled downwards. She spent her first year out of school working for a fast food outlet. In spite of the troubles at home, she continued to live there but she had a much higher income and her drug use became habituated during this period.

> *Yeah I was doing up to 50 hours a week there which is surprising for me now, but that's where I got into a lot of habits because I had my own money and I had 50 hours worth of pay. I'd go out with my friends and we just go everywhere. We would all just get high yeah and run amuck.*

The pressure of managing this lifestyle, a job, and her family life eventually compounded and lead to a situation where Amanda's parents '*threw me out on the streets*'. Amanda was initially housed in supported accommodation run by religious charities and then eventually re-housed on her own in government housing. She recounted living in numerous houses since

she had left her parental home. Her subsequent housing had been sub-standard in terms of hygiene and precarious in both tenure and safety.

She had been in a number of situations where she had been threatened by associates of ex-residents or neighbours and consequently felt unsafe in her home.

> *I live in fear like. I have for the last five years...One night all of these dudes jumped the fence and bashed on all of my windows and I didn't know who they were. Yeah but the rent is cheap, the rent is cheap, $64 per week.*

The challenge of being financially and domestically independent is significant for young people. At $230 a fortnight on Youth Allowance, Amanda found it difficult to find affordable housing. She stressed her need to live alone because she did not have the relationships for shared living.

> *I would rather live with somebody but I mean I can't because I don't have the right kind of friends and I will not be moved into a house with a stranger ever again. And I don't know. The only person I could live with is my ex because we worked together that aspect of it but just the emotional side of it ruined us. I hate living by myself though especially in those houses. They are rotten and they scare the crap out of me, yeah. I live in fear like.*

At this time in her life Amanda recognized her need to develop sustainable relationships but also recognised her lack of opportunities to forge the 'right kind' of relationships. This need for opportunities to forge the 'right kind' of relationships drew her back towards education.

One of the key complexities for young people who left school early was the sense of isolation they experienced. For Glen, Amanda and Emily, social isolation was palpable in their families of origin and once out of school was an exigent concern. Emily told us:

> *I just want more friends I guess and it is kind of hard when you don't go out much to meet people, especially when you don't go to school, you don't really meet people and like the people I have met so far are really crap, none of them really mean that much except my best friend and now I am even starting to doubt that.*

Some, like Linox, had strong relationships with peers and family but social networks isolated them from the opportunity structures that might lead them out of poverty. Furthermore, the work required to secure well-being in the context of isolated communities tended to distract from engagement with opportunity structures that might lead into adequately paid work. Linox was looking for ways back to education but the information networks in his community were particularly poor.

> *At the moment I regret it, because I had one dream when I was at school that I always wanted to be a police officer, like when I was at school it*

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> *wasn't in my mind at all. Now it is. It's been harder [since I left school].*
> *Welcome to the real world. My parents always told me it was going to be*
> *harder, it's hard to find a job, which it is now.*

Young people from households characterised by generations of joblessness and educational failure appeared to have much greater difficulty finding pathways back into education or employment, as they often did not have relatives or acquaintances who could knowledgeably support them.

BJ had left school at the beginning of year 11 and then gone back after a year out of school with no work and tried at school again, only to drop out again after a few weeks. He attributed this to *'too many distractions with me mates'*. He could see that employers were *'mostly looking for experienced workers'* and was desultory in relation to finding work and what might happen next. BJ and Linox's are two of the three young people who did not find their way back into second chance schools. These three young people were financially supported by family members and were not in touch with agencies who had current knowledge of the education, training and employment system.

10.5. Going Back to Second-Chance School

Second-chance schools offered young people opportunities to get back into steady patterns of learning and socializing. The time frames that young people had been out of contact varied from very short periods to over three years. Those that had been out of contact with education for longer had usually had been engaged in work which became increasingly intermittent and then ceased. There was considerable variation in how young people had fared during this period. Some had been supported by benefits, some by welfare agencies and some informally by friends and relatives. Referrals to second chance schooling options typically came through young people's contact with various support agencies (case managers, charity agencies, NGO services). Again and again, young people mentioned the importance of their relationships with teachers, low student/teacher ratios, reduced and flexible hours, and flexibility of timeframes for learning as features of these schools that enabled them to successfully participate.

Bella spoke of this nexus of caring and flexibility:

> *I don't know it's just you sort of work at your own pace and you're not*
> *rushed or you're not you know you can do it and if it takes you like three*
> *days it doesn't matter because you're doing it as fast as you can. They're*
> *not pushing you to finish it.*

Duncan spoke in similar terms, noting:

> *They give you heaps of choices because it's like they treat you like young*
> *adults sort of thing, I mean they sort of swear and stuff as well. You know*
> *not like say f-word every 10 minutes but you know far out you know stop*
> *being a shit head sort of thing, you know. Something you wouldn't hear in*

> *the class room but they just like treating you like that new age sort of thing*
> *you know. Makes it a bit easy to socialise yeah. (Duncan, male, 17 years*
> *South Australia)*

Finding a pathway back to education was not easy for many young people. Most found out about second-chance schools in an ad hoc manner through word of mouth *'a friend of my mother told us about this place'*. Furthermore, some young people like Linox and BJ were simply not likely to hear about second chance schools through their social networks and possibly needed some support to even walk through the door of an educational institution because of their layered sense of failure and a lack of capacity to engage with learning.

Interestingly, and perhaps reassuringly, the two young people who found their way into second chance schools through the service system specifically designated to support youth transitions, were the only ones in the study who were completely disconnected from their families of origin and who had substantial contact with services previously. In both cases, however, these pathways were not formal authorised pathways. These young people both described extremely chaotic periods in their lives and both appeared to stumble upon the structures and support agencies that supported them most. It may well be that the young people who face the most extreme multiple disadvantages are not looking for services or solutions to the challenges they face as they need assistance to process the information about support services when they are presented with it. Here it is the relational elements of service delivery that are most important.

Glen maintained contact with an individual social worker who moved through various government and non-government organizations and who was at the time heading up an alternative school. Glen was neither formally enrolled nor intending to enrol in any certificates, but he came to the service to visit the worker with whom he had developed a secure attachment. In contrast, Amanda had come into contact with a youth shopfront service when she first left home and continued to frequent this place, as it changed service type and NGO providers. There were times when Amanda did not fit the profile of the various services' client groups, but the (changing) staff continued to support her.

> *This place is nearly closed down so many times as well because of different*
> *companies taking over and what not. So has to take me four years to get*
> *my [certificate of year 10 equivalent] so that's not their fault that's because*
> *there's been [NGO] taking over and there used to be other people that used*
> *to run this place. And yeah it's been chaotic but they've still kept up with it*
> *and still do what they can for you...*

This observation offers an interesting and perhaps counter-intuitive take on service turnover and rapid policy change. During the years that Amanda had been using the service there has been significant overhaul of the youth services and post compulsory schooling policy arenas. In 2008, for example, Australian Commonwealth and State Governments signed a National Partnership agreement on Youth Transitions and Attainment that channels funding for youth services that aim to support education, training and workforce engagement.

Service continuity in the face of organisational change attests to the moral economy of those who deliver services to young people. The neo-liberal marketised approach to the delivery of post compulsory education services may lead to rapid turnover of organisations but does not necessarily lead to a rapid turn-over of ethos. Here, it is important to acknowledge that professionals on the ground are not necessarily first and foremost focussed on formal and sometimes narrow outcomes but may be responding to situations using their own ethics and sense of professional practices.

Amanda's story suggests that the various service providers who have been based in the building she returns to have been operating on an informal 'no wrong door' policy for many years. While this has worked for Amanda, it is also useful to recognise that she carried a sense of service entitlement that was not shared by the larger cohort and that all young people may not have been able to access support through the same mechanisms.

Educational participation and attainment does bring about a sense of well-being in and of itself, and some young people may benefit from structures which offer pedagogical containment as they raise their expectations that learning can be interesting, relevant and possible for them. This is visible in the story of Ryan, aged 16 years, who had a precarious attachment to education and a fragile sense of his own capabilities to secure an education. Nonetheless throughout his interview, he expressed satisfaction with elements of his schooling that made it possible for him to meet some of his own expectations of what it was to be a 'successful' student.

Ryan's father had died in front of him when he was 12 and he viewed himself as 'having psychotic problems'. He understood his own learning and behaviour management as something that required external control. In spite of what seemed to be a volatile disengagement from formal schooling after his father died, he appreciated his current situation, having recently been part of a learning community within a juvenile justice facility. Ryan perceived his schooling experiences in the lock-up as successful because he engaged with learning and this was a significant change for him. The education program in the lock-up aimed to make appropriate behaviours achievable by engaging young people in activities that interested them and developed their existing skills.

> 'They make you go, it's not real school but, they get people in to do aerosol art and that'.

He felt he was able to participate in this structure and did not 'end up bashing someone'.

His release from the Juvenile Justice facility was dependent on his attendance in a special program run on-site through a mainstream school which focussed on attaining the credentials necessary for an apprenticeship. Ryan was clearly not convinced in his own ability to remain out of trouble and estimated his chances of staying out of the lock-up at 50 per cent. In spite of this view, and the posturing that accompanied the 'bad boy' persona he presented, Ryan spoke very positively of the flexible arrangements of the initiative, and of the chances offered to attain the credentials necessary for employment. He was proud of his achievements

and held onto the knowledge he had learned about how to forge a pathway to a job. In the face of a chaotic social and emotional life, he valued the structures that enabled him to be engaged in learning and that contributed to his self-assessed 50 per cent chance of a different kind of future.

In their stories about this trajectory out of formal education, there is evidence of a variety of tactics used to secure adequate, 'enough', or momentary well-being. Young people's narratives foregrounded particular qualities such as non-conformity, capacity to critique social systems, 'streetwise savvy', and strong positions and loyalties to peer communities. These qualities enabled the young people to account for what could otherwise be construed as a failure.

The qualities showcased in these narratives were also visible in narratives of re-engagement. Those who re-engaged with alternate education pathways or, in some cases, with formal schooling, cited boredom, a sense of futility and the danger of the street as the impetus to re-engage with formal education. Finding pathways was not easy for many young people, and those who did find these pathways relied on advice from parents or a teacher or social worker they trusted.

There are several key hypotheses about aspirations in the context of disadvantaged communities (Kintrea, 2009). First, aspirations and attainment levels are lower in deprived communities; second, there is a relationship between young people's aspirations and their educational attainment; and third, 'community level' attitudes, aspirations and expectations can have a significant influence on young people's aspirations and therefore attainment.

While most of the young people we interviewed were in second chance schools, aspirations for education and training were articulated by those engaged in these activities. Linox, for example told us:

> '*I don't want to go back to school, I just want to keep studying, but not in school.*'

The most salient feature determining their aspirations was the length of time they had been out of formal schooling and the level of sequential difficulties they faced. Knowing where to go and what to do was more of an issue than aspirations *per se*.

10.6.   Summary Comments

The experiences of the young people we talked to show how the challenges and pressures associated with economic disadvantage made it difficult for them to remain in school – leaving often seemed like an easier choice. Typically, there was no single factor that pushed these young people into leaving school, but more of a process, of which economic disadvantages, social exclusion and poor schooling experiences were all part. Most, having left, were trying to re-engage with education.

Participation in education and training is critically important for economically disadvantaged young people. However, the concept of opportunity structures in current policy approaches is too narrowly focused on the end game – namely on structures that move young people into

actual work or educational experience. The stories recounted here of those who had disengaged from school suggest the need for a recasting of the structures so that they support young people in the transition from education to work – a move that for many young people is only one among a number of on-going challenges. Disenfranchised young people are typically more concerned in the first instance with their personal safety, and with opportunities to have secure relationships with others. Once these opportunities are secured, opportunities for educational attainment and employment move up the list of priorities.

Australia's productivity agenda subsumes attention to the more relational aspects of young people's well-being. While a productivity-driven education agenda delivers adequate education for many, those who are struggling to secure well-being across the domains of their experiences are failed by the system. Reforms to the education system which provide multiple pathways and learning options constitute a step towards meeting the learning needs of young people growing up in adverse circumstances. However, these initiatives are framed by the rubric of human capital development and economic efficiency, and the need to build the nation's capacity to meet long term economic challenges.

A Discussion Paper released before the 2007 election that pre-empted many of the most recent policy changes argues:

> 'We can no longer afford significant levels of disengagement among Australian youth. In modern Australia greater social and economic equity is integral to economic efficiency and capacity. Traditional social policy concerns are now irrefutably economic imperatives.' (Australian Industry Group and Dusseldorp Skills Forum. 2007:9)

Current political rhetoric in Australia positions educational institutions as 'the key mechanism for government to influence how successfully young people transition to adulthood' (Rudd and Gillard, 2008, p.27). There is no doubt that educational institutions are key focal points for communities. Yet when the focus of these institutions is primarily inward looking, and tied to academic and skill-based outcomes rather than broader community development outcomes, they fall short of a focus on the *transition to adulthood* and are in fact only focussed on supporting young people's *transition to work*.

Current initiatives which support young people to navigate pathways are important, but do little to address the more substantive and difficult issues that face those young people who are struggling to meet needs that fall outside of an attainment-oriented education system. This system is focussed on 'improvement' for its lowest achievers, rather than on the goal of meeting their needs so they can go on to achieve their fullest potential in terms of education and training, and in subsequent employment.

The current system assumes that young people are making decisions about participation based on a priority system that directs them towards the qualification to work route in the first instance and presumes that other attachments (to place, and to social networks) are secondary

in decision-making about participation in education training and employment (Smyth and Hattam, 2002; Smyth, Hattam, and Cannon, 2004; K te Riele, 2011).

White and Green (2011) argue that objective decisions taken in relation to training and employment can only be understood by recognising the subjective dimensions which underpin decisions, and that failure to recognise this will diminish the chance of success of intervention programs. Young people's attachments to things other than educational attainment may well be where they focus their energies as they transition to adulthood and create critical social-emotional foundations on which capabilities associated with educational attainment and employment are laid.

This is the experience of the fourteen young people who left school early who we talked to in *Making a Difference*. Family, community and peer group pressures often forced these young people to disengage from school – a decision often made all the easier by the poor quality of their schooling experience, and the total lack of relevance of much of the curriculum to their daily lives.

The discussion in this chapter suggests that we need to find better ways to provide not only stable living environments for families experiencing hard times, but also consistent education for young people who move homes a lot, greater allocation of resources including highly skilled and experienced teachers to disadvantaged schools, and greater coordination of services in disadvantaged communities that relieve the pressures that they face. These represent a formidable set of challenges.

11. Conclusions and Policy Implications

One of the motivations behind the *Making a Difference* project was to better understand how children and young people perceive and respond to different forms of economic adversity and exclusion and thus to gain more insight into what *they think* needs to be done to make a difference to their lives – now and into the future.

This was achieved through the design features of the project. First, the design was grounded in the principle of children's rights to speak about things that affect them and so has privileged the perspectives of young people themselves. Second, the design sought to capture the complex, multi-dimensional nature of disadvantage. Third, considerable effort has gone into understanding the different contexts which frame the experiences of the young people who participated in the study. Fourth, the decision to offer participants alternative ways of engaging with the research allowed us to extend our coverage wider than would otherwise have been the case; fifth, the role and participation of our Partner Organisations and, later, local service providers (including teachers) allowed us to tap into another seam of local knowledge about the research sites and how young people are embedded within them..

These features of the research all contributed to the eventual outcome presented in the foregoing pages. We cannot emphasise enough how important these practices and protocols were for the quality and scope of the final product. Put simply, conducting research with young people presents many formidable challenges and unless these are tackled and addressed in ways that recognise and respect the views of young people, there is little prospect of getting them to engage with the research to the degree that is evident from this report. Our two main fieldworker/researchers, Jen Skattebol and Megan Bedford, deserve much of the credit for turning the Chief Investigators' original ideas into practice with such purpose and effect.

In conducting the research, we have tried to give voice to the concerns of young people and to represent those voices in this report. The comments and insights reported earlier are testimony to our success in achieving this, and we do not intend to try to summarise what those voices told us here. Readers will be able to make their own decisions about what they have read and about the implications.

Of course, in giving priority to the views of young people, we also have to acknowledge the role that the research team played in setting the framework within which their views were conveyed. All of the research team participated in the fieldwork to gain first-hand insights into young people's poverty contexts; insights that added immeasurably to the overall analysis of the data. The team established the focus of the interviews, selected criteria for determining research sites and participants, and created inter-subjective spaces as interviews were conducted and recorded.

A crucial role of the research team was to analyse and interpret the views that were conveyed to us and this was a collaborative process drawing on the interdisciplinary strengths and experiences based in the fields of economics, sociology and education. The findings thus

reflect our role and input as well as that of the study participants – although our hope is that we have mainly captured the realities of *their* lives and what *they* said and thought.

It is also important to note that this is a relatively small-scale study that is not capable of (nor intended to) produce findings that can be generalised to the community as a whole. Our focus was on better understanding the experience of economic adversity and exclusion as perceived by young people and to locate that experience within the various networks around which their lives are structured – primarily, family, neighbourhood and school (and in some cases, the labour market).

In order to be able to delve into the details to the degree necessary to generate insight into what was a very complex system of overlapping but fluid relationships with immediate family, other relations, peers, rivals, teachers and service providers, it is necessary to engage in-depth with young people in ways that are not feasible in larger quantitative surveys. Instead, our aim was to produce findings that addressed the underlying circumstances, perceptions and motivations that drive the processes that produce outcomes for young people growing up in the shadow of economic adversity and neighbourhood decline.

It is clear that the circumstances facing young people are all particular in some dimensions, even though they also share some common elements. But it is equally the case that how these elements interact and combine can have an important bearing on how young people respond to the challenges they face. This means that even identifying the threads that are common to many cases does not mean that a common response is implied, because the specific circumstances of each case intervene in ways that may make any such conclusion inappropriate.

These considerations all need to be kept at the forefront when reviewing the concluding comments that follow.

The first clear finding to emerge from the study (which echoes that found in many other studies) is that many participants did not have access to an adequate income to ensure they were able to participate in education and social life at level that most would consider normal for Australian young people. This meant that they typically adjusted their behaviour or their preferences in order to either contribute to the family income or to reduce their demands on the family budget (see discussion in Section 8.4). This in turn had clear flow-on effects on their capacity to engage in the forms of activities that are most likely to create a solid base for them to gain the type of employment which will allow them to escape poverty in the future. There is a need for greater access to opportunities that allow young people to contribute to household income or earn an independent income.

The key assumption that often underpins income support policies for young people is that resources can be allocated on the basis of what is known about the resources of the household. This assumption is problematic for many young people and does not accord with the realities of how their households are structured and function. Household membership in economically stressed households is far more fluid than assumed in conventional studies of

income distribution and redistribution, including how they account for the role of income transfer programs. There is a pressing need for further research on household and income expenditure patterns that incorporates young people's perspectives and for such research to be considered by policy makers (see Section 4.4).

Furthermore, the ability to make contributions to the family income was not evenly distributed across the sample, but appeared to be affected by how well the local community is already connected to labour markets. The relatively poor educational performance of many young people who face economic adversity was compounded by the lack of stability provided by their families, who were often struggling to cope economically and engage with the labour market themselves. This resulted in a constant process of moving that further disrupted educational trajectories and suggests a need for better economic buffers for families so they don't have to move so often. (See the discussion on high mobility in Sections 7.6, 9.6 and 10.3).

The cost of accessing services and facilities at school and in out of school hours that broaden young people's social networks and skill sets often added to existing financial pressures, and the provision of free or nominal cost services could form part of a policy solution to these shortfalls and their consequences. Furthermore, young people from economically disadvantaged circumstances need to be able to access the same services that their better-off counterparts use because of the lack of integration that occurs when they are provided with different goods and services; namely those targeted at the poor (see Section 5.6). Young people were acutely aware of the low status of these good and services in the eyes of their better-off counterparts, and this affected their willingness to access them (irrespective of the cost involved).

Areas where labour markets were weak and unemployment was high were often also characterised by poor transport infrastructure and deep patterns of social exclusion of low-income families offered few labour market opportunities to young people. These areas require good, cheap, fast and frequent transport to promote engagement with the world of work (see the discussion in Section 5.6).

The data illustrate powerfully the different ways in which economic adversity is experienced spatially. In some areas, there are few opportunity structures available to young people, while in others these structures are present but not accessible. Opportunity structures interact with the factors that contribute to social exclusion to produce participation milieus and opportunity contexts These structures need not only to be present but need to offer bridging possibilities that allow economically disadvantaged young people to mix with other young people with different life experiences if they are to produce the participation milieus and opportunity contexts that can support their civic, educational and economic participation.

Opportunity structures need to be conceptualised long before young people reach the age of 15, when they begin to make the transition from school to work, and these opportunity structures are most important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those in middle childhood. Targeted services where disadvantaged young people can learn

some of the skills that may not be transmitted in their families are important, but should be accompanied by infrastructure that supports young people to participate on an equal footing with their better-off counterparts. There is a need for more opportunity structures that support bridging capital (particularly to the labour market and employment-focused activities) and enable disadvantaged young people to engage with others on an equal footing. Families often cannot afford for young people to participate in the types of opportunities that build these forms of capital and more programs are needed that can subsidise these activities.

More information is needed on the array of opportunity structures that support young people to move from formal schooling into work, particularly in areas where there is a history of inter-generational unemployment. There also appears to be a need for better place-based approaches to identifying what opportunity structures are needed and where and how these should interact with local participation milieus. Further research is needed into the way these opportunities are shaped by local contexts and in particular by processes of exclusion that operate in local contexts, and on how these structures oriented towards the needs of young people in middle childhood shape their transitions from school into work.

The research shows clearly that young people (and their families) read their sense of self-worth in large part from their environments and when they are housed and schooled in physically degraded environments, this affects their sense of self efficacy (see the discussion in Section 6.5). Concern about the quality of the local environment was often more acute than concern over the immediate financial circumstances of young people. When state and local government authorities who oversee the development and upkeep of public spaces neglect the physical spaces where people live and interact, they transmit powerful messages to disadvantaged people and to their better-off neighbours about the value and worthiness of our poorest citizens.

The need for integrated ("joined-up") policy solutions was evident to ensure that stressors experienced in one policy domain (e.g. inadequately small houses) do not flow over into other policy domains (e.g. neighbourhoods). Better (and more) coordinated action on the part of governments at all levels was a clear message to emerge from the research.

The data shows that while young people with strong bonded social networks miss out on many opportunities, they are buffered from the instabilities associated with weak or attenuated social networks which lead to high mobility and its consequences - in terms of school drop-out and family breakdown (see Section 7.3). Addressing these problems requires programs and policies which promote housing stability, that enable people to form dense durable bonds with others, and which enable people to develop bridging capital (as discussed in Section 7.5).

There was considerable evidence to support the proposition that the implementation of schooling choice policies entrenches disadvantage and contributes to social exclusion. The current system further divides young people because of the additional fees which elective subjects attract, making them unaffordable for many and producing adaptive preferences that meant that young people missed out on courses that were often most closely attuned with

their interests or aligned with their longer-term labour market prospects (see the discussion in Section 9.4). Students often formed close bonds with elective subject teachers, and their exclusion from these courses also denied them this opportunity to engage with a good role model.

Classroom learning needs to be intellectually challenging and undertaken in supportive environments conducive to learning (e.g. by less turn-over of staff), and the curriculum needs to be more responsive to circumstances of young people's lives outside of school (see Section 9.4). School is a central element in the lives of young people, and it is important that schools engage with families, especially where there has been loss of faith in education and communities.

Reforms to the education system which provide multiple pathways and learning options are a step towards meeting the learning needs of young people growing up in adverse circumstances. However, the focus of these institutions is often primarily inward-looking, and tied to academic and skill-based outcomes rather than to broader community development outcomes – on supporting young people's transition to work, rather than the transition to adulthood.

Our findings suggest that public policy does not adequately support the multiple contexts where young people maintain and forge relationships. This can mean that educational attainment and the skills needed to secure adequate employment are only in reach for young people who are socially included with adequate financial support.

Participation in education and training is critically important for economically disadvantaged young people. However, the concept of opportunity structures in current policy approaches is too narrowly focused on the end game – on structures that move young people into actual work or extend their educational experience. The stories recounted here of those at highest risk of disengaging from schooling and work call for a re-casting of the structures that support young people in the transition from education to work – a move that for many young people is among a number of on-going challenges (See Sections 10.3 and 10.6).

The most important message from the study as a whole is that economically disadvantaged young people are typically more concerned in the first instance with opportunities to have secure relationships with others than with their financial status or with educational attainment and employment. Inadequate income however, fails to support families to provide the stability and outreach needed for secure relationships with immediate family and with acquaintances who can broaden horizons and opportunities. Once secure relationships with others are in place, efforts to escape economic adversity through educational attainment and employment become paramount in young people's relationships.

Appendix A: Demographic Survey

Talking with young people about being included

Please answer the following background questions to help us with our interview or groupwork.

1. **What sex are you?** ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. **How old are you?** ....years

3. **Were you born in Australia?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

    3a   If not, where were you born? ....

    3b   Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent? ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. **Who do you live with?** ☐ my mum   ☐ other ....
        ☐ my dad
        ☐ other relatives
        ☐ both my parents
        ☐ my friend

5. **Do you attend school?** ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. **What year are you in at school?** ....
7. If you have left school, what year did you leave? ....

7. **Is your school in the suburb where you live?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

8. **How many years have you lived in the suburb where you live?** .... years
9. **What is the name of the suburb and postcode?** ....
10. **Do you have a job?** ☐ No
        ☐ Yes, casual/part-time
        ☐ Yes, full-time

11. **What type of housing do you live in?** ☐ temporary housing
        ☐ shared group housing
        ☐ public rental
        ☐ private rental
        ☐ own house

        Other (please describe)...

12. **Any other comments?** ....

Appendix B: Neighbourhood Activity Sheet and Socio-gram

Activities for young people:

First Name:
_____

Monday:

Thursday:

Saturday:

Tuesday:
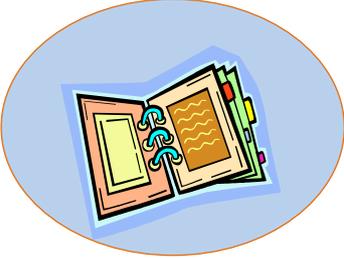
Wednesday:

Friday:

Sunday:

Socio-gram

My Family and Friends

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