

Reflecting on a decade of research on and with young people, it is perhaps surprising to find that, while circumstances for young people have changed, some of the fundamental issues that face researchers have not. Bridging the gap between the assumptions underlying government policies which affect youth, and the realities of young people's lives, remains a central concern.

In spite of the existence of a substantial research base on different groups of young people in Australia, much of which is policy oriented, policies which most affect young people (for example, education and training policy and income support policy) tends to continue to be based on narrow perceptions of what it means to grow up in Australia today.

Policies which assume a close link between age and educational participation, or which assume that all young people are equally able to draw on their family for financial and emotional support, are increasingly out of touch with the realities.

There are many examples of a mismatch between policies and young people's lives, including the continued use of the linear pathways metaphor which underlies post-compulsory education and training policy in Australia. What is missing is an understanding of the complexities of young people's lives that are now commonplace and, indeed, taken for granted by young people themselves. It is suggested that there is a need for those involved in policy formulation to rethink the meaning of youth.

In reassessing the meaning of youth in the 1990s and beyond, and generating more relevant policy models, a number of issues are central.

Age alone is increasingly less useful as a basis for understanding young people's lives. The growing use of information technology and, less dramatically but also as importantly,

The Post-1970

ISSUES FOR RESEARCHING YOUNG



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the prevalence of part-time student employment, means that young people who are secondary students may also (and perhaps in their eyes most importantly) be workers.

The concept of 'transition' that is implied in the idea of youth also needs to be used with care. The vision of 'adulthood' that it is assumed young people are progressing towards may be an adulthood of the past. For many young people today, the patterns of their present lives are likely to foreshadow their future lives, rather than simply being a 'stage' they are going through.

For these reasons and more, young people's distinct and varied perspectives on their lives, and their understandings, are especially relevant to the formation of policy.

Many of the age distinctions that are linked to a developmental model of 'growing up' are under challenge. For example, the strong trend for young people in Australia to combine part-time work with school has led to the suggestion that they are, in one sense, 'part-time adults'. These issues are explored in *Rethinking Youth* (Wyn and White 1997), drawing on both Australian and international research. The central concern of this book, and also a central issue for policy, is to provide a framework for understanding the continuities that exist

between the generations and at the same time, recognising the distinctive and 'new' issues and circumstances that face young people.

Researchers in other countries are also exploring the need to reassess the assumptions underlying research on young people. In *Rethinking the Youth Question*, Cohen (1997) explores the debates that have emerged about the conceptualisation of youth in the United Kingdom. His book, a collection of previously published essays written over a period of 20 years, was motivated by a belief that 'the youth question was too important to be left just to the young' (1997: 12). By this, Cohen means that it is important to 'go back to some of the wider and more fundamental issues of theory and method in the human sciences which had been lost sight of in the rush to youth culture' (1997: 12). For example, Cohen reflects on the importance of understanding the processes which marginalise young black people, some groups of young women, and working class youth, while at the same time recognising local youth cultural responses.

The complexity of doing this is reflected in the results of a longitudinal study of young people's health in Scotland by West (1997). West's study reveals a distinctive pattern emerging in which young people's greater opportunities and choices with regard to 'lifestyle' or 'leisure' have an

initial effect of undermining the class and gender divisions which were more obvious in previous generations. However, the longitudinal research reveals that in the longer term, class and gender effects reassert themselves in the form of occupational and job outcomes and, ultimately, in health outcomes.

Giroux (1997) takes up the issues of the implications of global media for the very idea of 'youth', arguing that the representations of youth in the media have brought in a powerful new conceptualisation of youth, affecting both young people and research and policy.

Australian research on young people suggests that while there are areas of continuity with previous generations, primarily because inequalities based on class, race and gender remain important, there are some important differences.

In attempting to grasp the distinctive experiences of young people after they leave secondary school, researchers at the Youth Research Centre have found it useful to refer to the 'post-1970 generation'. This is the first generation for whom the majority are expected to participate in post-compulsory education. They have grown up with the reality that the youth labour market has gone, to be replaced by part-time and casual work, mainly undertaken by students. In effect, the traditional 'transitions' to adulthood have been deferred or, perhaps more accurately, removed.

The term 'post-1970 generation' draws attention to the circumstances in which young people

Generation

PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

are living and the conditions they face, rather than focusing on their assumed characteristics, as do terms such as 'Generation X'. In Canada, the term 'generation on hold' has also been used to identify the circumstances of young people, focusing on the extent to which their transition to adulthood has been deferred (Cote and Allahar 1994). The use of these terms signals a developing awareness among youth researchers in industrialised countries that it is necessary to re-examine the assumptions that are held about the transition process from youth to adulthood. However, it is in this realm that the gap between policy and young people's lives appears to be difficult to bridge.

While youth and education policies continue to place the emphasis on a sequential transition model of pathways between the two worlds of study and work, young people's life patterns in the post-1970 generation are decidedly non-linear (Dwyer 1997, 1995).

The Youth Research Centre's *Pathways and Life Patterns Project*, a longitudinal study of young people in Victoria who completed secondary school in 1992 and continued their education with some form of post-secondary education or training, revealed that young people were making pragmatic choices that combined study and work. Only a minority of the young people could have been accurately described as following a linear progression through post-compulsory education, with a focus simply on gaining educational qualifications (Dwyer et al. 1997). The majority of young people, however, were involved

in both education or training and employment, and placed an equal emphasis on a range of activities in their lives, including their relationships and their life style.

The complex life patterns resulting from pragmatic decisions about work and study (for example, 'Can I do this TAFE course *and* keep my job?') have implications for education and training policy. Increased flexibility of delivery and articulation between courses and a redesigned curriculum that acknowledges young people's work experience and responsibilities is necessary to enhance the chances of young people having successful outcomes in the labour market.

But another dimension is also important. The post-1970 generation are not simply producing different patterns of living; many are involved in a reshaping of what growing up means. What the statistics on combining work and study do not reveal is the thinking, or approaches to life, that generate these patterns. Findings from the *Pathways and Life Patterns Project* suggest that pragmatism, optimism, flexibility in approach, and an ability to 'juggle' competing demands on one's time are integral to the production of the complex life patterns of this group of young people.

The school leavers of 1992 who went into post-secondary education or training took largely pragmatic decisions about their education and training based on future employment goals, but based also on the realities of their need to earn a living in the present and keeping in mind

their needs and responsibilities in relation to family and friends. A majority were optimistic about their outcomes, expecting to reap the benefits promised by further education in terms of secure professional employment. These school leavers were flexible, changing courses, shifting jobs and deferring study in order to maintain their longer-term goals and, because a majority combined work and study, they were coping with competing demands on their time.

The optimism of these young people is based on the belief, fostered by educational policy rhetoric, that post-secondary qualifications are the key to gaining a well paid, professional job that will lead to a career. To what extent is this hope validated by reality? As yet little research has been done to test the real extent of vocational integration associated with post-secondary education and training, and thereby to test the extent to which educational policies are offering a false hope for young people and their families. And for those who do gain employment, will their life patterns change dramatically?

It would be shortsighted to view this cohort of young people as a group who are in a distinctive 'transition' stage of complexity and uncertainty which will be replaced by a different, less contingent, 'adult' pattern at some time in the future.

Recent changes in workplace practices such as multi-skilling, cross-training and online learning suggest that combining forms of education and work will become more prevalent throughout people's working

lives. The shifting balance of industrial relations means that for many workers, employment will be contingent and contract based, breaking down the distinction between full- and part-time work. In other words, the notion of a linear progression from an education focus to an employment focus, from student to work, and from youth to adult, is likely to be at odds with reality. The life patterns that have been made visible in the Youth Research Centre's *Pathways and Life Patterns Project* may be looked upon as less a stage than a more general shift which affects an increasing section of the population.

The young people in the Youth Research Centre study provide a picture of young people who are coping well with complex and changing circumstances. They are the group who, in policy terms, are 'the mainstream', who have entered post-secondary education and training.

Yet, as this discussion has revealed, even among this group of young people, their initiatives and positive outlook are yet to be matched by policies which will enhance their complex 'pathways' rather than thwart them, and which recognise the diversity and complexity of their life choices. In research and in policy, more sophisticated understandings need to be developed about the interrelationships between study and work, and between the 'stages' of youth and adult.

As work and study are now interrelated in the lives of many young people, so the 'worlds' that have in the past enabled a clear distinction between youth and adult are more blurred.

These research findings have a number of implications for bridging the policy gap. One of the most fundamental issues is vocational integration. Currently, policies rest largely on the assumption that young

people's investment in education and training will be repaid by their job outcomes. Yet, this is a simplistic model, which contradicts people's experiences of ongoing education and training and the imprecise linkages between study and occupations.

The positive outlook of the young people in the *Pathways and Life Patterns Project* is based on their belief that there are employment opportunities available and that their individual efforts will be rewarded. Commenting on similar findings for young people in the United Kingdom, Rudd and Evans suggest that the 'new vocationalism' of the early 1990s has succeeded in transmitting an 'enterprise culture' to young people, in which they believe in individual merit and risk (Rudd and Evans 1998). The failure of vocational integration for them resulted in a 'downgrading' of expectations, and an acceptance of personal failure.

The new vocationalism, then, needs to be replaced at the policy level with youth and education policies which recognise the reality that throughout their lives, and not just in youth, people will be involved in combinations of work and study and other life concerns.

The framing of these policies should reflect the reality that the narrowly 'vocationalist' options which were shaped by employers' agendas which emphasise disembodied 'skills' need to be balanced with education and training options that reflect (and are shaped by) the broader preoccupations of young people, serving their needs to learn, work and to integrate their complex lives.

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Picture: Rhonda Milner

There are two important differences between results obtained by using the basket-of-goods method and the expenditure survey method as presented in the accompanying Tables. First, the basket-of-goods approach provides only part of the cost of a child, while the expenditure survey measures the total amount spent on the child. Second, the basket-of-goods method indicates how much parents would spend on their children if the child was to enjoy the fruits of the basket specified by the researcher. In this sense, it provides an 'ideal' or desirable costing. In contrast, the expenditure survey method indicates how much parents actually spend on their children, even though the amount spent might be considered inadequate or excessive by the objective standards of the basket-of-goods method.

Basket-of-Goods Approach Based on Lovering 1983 Adjusted to CPI figure September Quarter 1997					
	2 years	5 years	Age of child 8 years	11 years	Teenage
<i>Low income families</i> (below average weekly wage)					
Per week	31.73	40.72	49.94	52.96	78.89
Per year	1655.33	2161.29	2603.41	2762.83	4114.00
<i>Middle income families</i> (average weekly wage and above)					
Per week	47.75	53.56	69.15	89.51	131.26
Per year	2490.04	2794.78	3605.61	4551.97	6844.60

Note: Included are food and clothing, fuel, household provisions, costs of schooling (not fees), gifts, pocket money and entertainment. NOT included are housing, transport, school fees or uniforms, child care, medical or dental expenses. Holidays are a component of the middle income figures only.
Source: Lovering, K. (1984), Cost of Children in Australia, Working Paper no.8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Expenditure Survey Approach Based on Lee 1989 Adjusted to AWE figure September Quarter 1997								
Age of child (years)	Food	Transport	Recreation	Household goods	Housing and utilities	Clothing	Other*	Total expenditure weekly
0-1	31.98	47.18	32.77	32.56	26.31	17.74	17.64	206.30
2-4	28.12	36.65	26.19	30.02	16.85	15.57	15.14	168.77
5-7	29.63	38.22	39.40	27.13	21.27	18.00	11.94	182.54
8-10	41.37	53.24	39.65	28.50	14.38	16.62	26.22	220.17
11-13	45.59	45.18	36.91	31.66	30.37	24.04	30.69	244.84

* Includes medical and dental costs, education costs and other miscellaneous costs. Costs of children vary according to the number of children in the family, the parents' incomes and whether one or both parents are working.
Note: The figures in the table relate to a one-child, one-income family with an income of \$693.80 gross per week. The Lee data show that two children cost about 55 per cent more than one child, while three children cost about twice the cost of one child. The dollar costs of children are relatively 'flat' compared with rises in family income: children in poor families cost proportionally more, and children in rich families proportionally less than those in middle income families.
Source: Lee, D. (1989), Calculations of the direct costs of children based on the 1984 ABS Household Expenditure Survey, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.