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## **Perceptions and needs of rural young people in the south-west of Western Australia : Implications for pedagogy**

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**PERCEPTIONS AND NEEDS OF RURAL  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
IN THE SOUTH-WEST OF WESTERN  
AUSTRALIA:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY**

Rhonda Oliver  
Lynelle Watts  
Joan Strikwerda-Brown  
David Hodgson  
Marilyn Palmer

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This report describes a study undertaken with young people who have been educated in the south western region (the 'South West') of Western Australia. In this study we have explored their perceptions and needs, collecting data by way of focus group interviews. In our discussion, individuals and the schools from where the data were collected are not identified.

The main findings are described thematically, including issues relating to the participants' feelings about living in the South West, in Perth, higher education, the role of schools and transition to high school, their particular school, their teachers and different subjects, and finally about their aspirations. As the discussion proceeds, information is provided in separate text boxes that relate these findings to the curriculum documents currently being used in Western Australian schools. Whilst a comprehensive audit of this documentation was undertaken, the list presented here is by no means exhaustive and as such, teachers and schools wishing to address the needs of their own students need to examine these within the context of their own community.

From this research, it is clear that although there are areas of need, there is much about their life, lifestyle and education that this age group, living in the south western region of WA, enjoy and appreciate. Of the areas of need identified, the evidence suggests that some of these could be better addressed by utilising the information available from the current curriculum. At the same time, however, it is clear that it is not possible to meet all identified needs simply by relying on the curriculum. Indeed some issues such as the impact of drugs and alcohol and providing opportunities to meet the aspirations of young people are beyond the scope of a single school, curriculum or teacher, and therefore strong partnerships between policy makers, the community, school and parents are essential.

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Participating schools included:

- Busselton Senior High School
- Collie Senior High School
- Cornerstone Christian College
- Eaton Community College
- Georgiana Molloy Anglican School
- Hope Christian College
- Margaret River Senior High School
- Manjimup Senior High School
- ECU University Preparation Course

Some other young people, independent of schools, also participated in focus groups and we would like to express our gratitude to these individuals.

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## Introduction

The original purpose of this study was to investigate youth needs, specifically in the south western region (the 'South West') of Western Australia, and then to explore how these needs might be addressed in terms of current curriculum and teaching practices. The following research questions guided our investigation:

- What are the educational and occupational aspirations of young people from the South West of Western Australia?
- What do young people identify as influences on their educational and occupational aspirations and attainment?

As the data collection progressed, it was evident to all those involved that, whilst there were expressed needs, many of the young people we interviewed were quite happy with their lives and their lifestyle, despite having varied views of their school experiences (curriculum and teachers), some positive and some negative. The students were able to offer some very thoughtful and clear descriptions of what sorts of things work for them at school, what does not work, and what needs to happen to make school meaningful and relevant to their lives and needs. The title of this report reflects this finding – describing the perceptions as well as the needs of this age group.

The target population for this study was young people (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in the high school years, and also those who had recently left South West high schools to commence further education and/or work. As will be discussed later, the participants were an opportunistic sample and to some extent self-selecting. Although nominated to participate by our contact teacher (usually on the basis of whatever classes were running on the day we visited), in practice it was only those who were willing to be interviewed and who were able to get their parental permission forms signed and returned to school in time, who participated. Because of this, it is not possible to claim that the 230 participants were representative of the population of young people. Further, and despite our best attempts, few Indigenous students participated. Despite these factors, the overwhelming consistency of responses to our questions indicated to us that our data were both valid and reliable. Of course there remains a need for further research. For instance, it would be worthwhile exploring the questions with more of the Indigenous students. It would also be helpful to work with teachers, to share these findings and to collaborate with them in order to examine ways of meeting the needs that emerged from the data. An area of particular interest, especially given recent work in the area, is the perception of participants that bullying is a fact of life which serves as a kind of preparation for life and this is a point that would bear further study. Therefore, we hope that this report will serve to stimulate future research.

This report begins with an overview of the literature pertaining to the areas of adolescents' and youths' needs, a description of the methodology, including a discussion of Grounded Theory (the methodology that guided this research), and then a

presentation of the findings. Within these findings, where relevant, a description is provided of those aspects of the curriculum that may be used to address an identified need. At times an indication may also be given that gaps are apparent in the current curriculum documentation. Finally, the report is drawn into a conclusion that gives suggestions for further research.

## Literature review

### *Researching adolescence and adolescents*

Understanding adolescence continues to exercise the energy of adults across a range of areas, from policy makers to politicians, parents to academics, teachers to psychologists, and musicians to magazine editors. Indeed, as Cohen and Ainley (2000) assert in their consideration of the state of youth studies in Britain:

Young people have had to carry a peculiar burden of representation; everything they do, say, think, or feel, is scrutinised by an army of professional commentators for signs of the times. Over the last century, the 'condition of the youth question' has assumed increasing importance as being symptomatic of the health of the nation or the future of the race, the welfare of the family, or the state of civilisation as we know it. (p. xv)

The same could be said when we consider youth studies in Australia (Kelly, 2000, p. 83). Adolescence is big business and marketing to adolescents has become an art form in the wake of new forms of 'global multicultural capitalism; trading off cultural cross-overs, fusions, ethnic diversities and hybridities of every kind' (Cohen & Ainley, 2000, p. 240). This has led researchers to consider the impacts of consumer culture on young people in terms of self-identity formations and the construction of various youth subcultures (Bessant, Watts, & Sercombe, 1998, p. 62; Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 13).

Moreover while this stage of life remains one of great concern to adults, it is also of interest to adolescents themselves as they begin to negotiate a world that becomes larger and more complex as they move from primary school into secondary school and beyond. This makes reviewing the literature concerned with adolescence a complex endeavour as we map the different disciplinary approaches to the 'problem' of adolescence and place this study in relation to these approaches.

We begin with an examination of the way broad disciplinary areas such as history, sociology and education have understood the stage of adolescence and how these insights have shaped various research studies of young people in Australia. We have also surveyed a rich body of local research from the South West to place this study in context and in relation to the concerns and questions of local stakeholders who have preceded us. We examine these sources in relation to the questions of our own research which has assumed that young people themselves are closest to the context of their worlds (Flyvbjerg, 2001; see also Noel, 1999) and are therefore best placed as informants in terms of understanding their respective aspirations and concerns.

## ***History of adolescence***

There is some agreement amongst historians that modern adolescence arose as an 'object' worthy of study in relationship to the advent of mass secondary schooling (Bessant et al., 1998; Campbell, 1995a, p. 12). In the period before the late nineteenth century, adolescence as a recognised stage barely existed. Demos (1986, cited in Campbell, 1995a, p. 13) identified three distinct, historical stages of adolescence: the colonial period; the industrial period; and finally, modern adolescence.

The colonial stage (1788-1901) was characterised by the assumption that adult responsibilities in the context of households and farms with intergenerational mixing were normal. This is the apprenticeship model of youth and it persisted until the rise of the middle classes (Bessant et al., 1998, p. 6). It is interesting to consider that at this particular time the only personal crisis that a young person entertained was that of religious conversion (Demos 1986, cited in Campbell, 1995a, p. 13). According to Campbell, Demos was very influenced by the work of Erik Erikson and psychoanalytic approaches to explaining adolescence as a stage of crisis and conflict (Campbell, 1995a, p. 13). These theories of adolescence continue to be influential today.

The industrial stage (1901-1945) saw the movement of young people into work in factories and urban centres rather than in households and on farms. In order to take up these opportunities there was a need for an educational system that differed from the previous one, which remained in a classical form intended for the clergy (Bessant et al., 1998, p. 13). It was also in the industrial stage that juvenile delinquency emerged as a social problem (Bessant et al., 1998) due to enormous numbers of children and young people neither working nor in school, with many living on the streets. For young people at that time, living in sparsely populated Australia and in largely pastoral communities, an extended adolescence as we know it today was not possible and most young people were employed from a young age.

When mass schooling was introduced, it was initially aimed at children in the primary years and was mostly taken up by the burgeoning middle classes. However, in general, education was restricted to males. The opportunities for young women were minimal and they remained sequestered in household work and domestic situations. This had the effect of entrenching gender stereotypes, leading to an increasing split between public and private spheres (Thornton, 1995; Wearing, 1996). This split between private and public spheres arose at a time when increasing romanticism confined women to the household. In historical terms, from this period until the advent of second wave feminism, discussions of youth and adolescence primarily used the male experience as the template (Apter, 1990).

The middle to late twentieth century marks the modern period of adolescence. During this period, new institutions such as secondary schools emerged and because of this young people became increasingly confined to learning, working and playing with

groups of similar age. In turn, environments specifically designed for them became more common. As a consequence, there was an increasing emphasis on peer groups for shaping identity and youth subcultures. Adolescence as a distinct developmental period, which included issues of crisis and conflict, was more fully defined and understood (Campbell, 1995a). As Campbell (1995a) points out:

Modern adolescence was not an end in itself. The historical processes which led to its 'invention' towards the end of the nineteenth century were intimately bound to the emergence of modern organisational forms of industry, commerce and government. In turn they sustained continuing class formations and the evolving gender order. The rapid expansion of secondary schooling during that period had an important role in all these processes. (p. 69)

What historians do not agree on is whether adolescence is a passing phenomenon and as such should be considered merely a stage related to the specific period of history in which it emerged. The core arguments of this debate reside in the question of whether the movement of young people in the 1960s towards independent cultural, sexual and political activity sufficiently subverted the previous dependence on families and schools. In turn this raises the question of whether this movement marked a new phase in youth history (Campbell, 1995a). Even so it is apparent that it paved the way for the current and modern emphasis by commentators from sociology, cultural studies, and psychology on the *identity formation work* said to be undertaken by adolescents in this stage of life.

In terms of the research undertaken in the current study, this debate is of interest only with respect to the comments that emerged from the young people interviewed when they articulated such independent *identity formation work*, a point that will be discussed in the section on the findings from the study. The young people in this study frequently emphasised their attachment to their families, schools and communities even when they pointed to things they would like to change about each of these. Young people's location within, or in relation to, institutions of secondary schooling is of rather more salient interest as secondary schooling remains a key frame for this stage of life for young people and was a key site for accessing participants in this study. Therefore, a brief examination of the history of secondary schooling in Australia is warranted and so we turn to this next.

### ***Secondary schooling in Australia***

In the early part of the twentieth century the role of secondary schooling in the social life of the community was well discussed. It was generally understood that education at this level should 'impart a higher mental training which would have an immediate effect on the positive appreciation of the higher culture [and that] such training allowed a better grasp of justice, humanity, and courtesy' (Unley High 1934, cited in Campbell, 1995a, p.

54). This discussion also defined a model of secondary schooling that saw it as continuous over a period of several years and as being fulltime. This, in turn, allowed the young person the full opportunity to come to 'a greater ability to express thoughts clearly, emphatically, and without hesitation, and to reason fairly and to form sound judgements'(Campbell, 1995b).

This 1934 exhortation on the benefits of secondary schooling primarily focussed on its benefits in relation to boys (Campbell, 1995a, p. 55). The benefits for girls were rather more complex and were tied to their aspirations as wives and mothers rather than to their intentions for participation in public sphere activities such as paid work (Selzer, 1994, pp. 55-57). This sexual division of labour was undermined somewhat by the needs of industry during the First, and more importantly the Second, World War, which saw an increasing number of girls take up employment across sectors previously occupied by males (Fox, 1991, pp. 143-144). Post war society saw women return to the home and private sphere, but increasingly women began to agitate for more access to employment and education (Weeks, 1996, pp. 70-85). Secondary school became increasingly coeducational and girls' uptake of secondary education increased, yet the opportunities for girls remained focussed on the household by the needs of the nation for wives and mothers. According to Kaplan (1996, p. 6) the 1950s and 1960s remained a time of deep constraint for women in Australia.

It should also be said that during these times class remained a pivotal construct in many accounts of the advent of mass secondary schooling in Australia. While the public rhetoric called for mass access to secondary schooling and saw a rapid expansion in secondary school infrastructure as Australians moved into the newly fashioned suburbs, inequality was built into the system from the start (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982, p. 15). This is because the social classes approached secondary schooling for their children from their various positions in relation to its respective benefit in gaining employment for their children. As Campbell (1995) points out when discussing very early secondary schooling in Australia:

social classes made and used the new secondary schools differently. The introduction of state high schools was of special importance. They increased the levels of participation, sometimes dramatically, of the children from employed middle and skilled working classes. (p. 70)

According to Connell et al. (1982, p. 18) the social divisions created by the impact of social class can be seen in their 1982 study of secondary education in Australia, whereby 'streaming' young people between academic and non-academic curricula was still a standard practice. Academic streams continued to remain the most prestigious with technical or non-academic streams primarily remaining the preserve of working class families. This trend was reflected in both government and independent school systems in the years post World War II.

There were a number of enquiries about education in the 1970s, with the 1973 Karmel (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission. & Karmel, 1973) report being probably the most important due to its emphasis on social equality as a core value in education. As Connell et al. (1982, p. 23) point out, this was the official acknowledgement that the strategy of expansion had not really worked to deliver equality of outcome and many children remained disadvantaged. Despite this, a policy shift occurred in the 1980s which saw the emphasis move from addressing inequality to measures designed to make schools more relevant in delivering workers to industry<sup>1</sup>. Indeed Marginson (1997, cited in Bessant et al., 1998, p. 151) makes the point that education continues to be widely seen as an 'investment in a nation's economic well-being' and thus Commonwealth and State government policy has increasingly linked education funding to labour market outcomes. Despite this link by policy makers and government between education and employment, it has also been acknowledged by commentators that spending a longer time in education did not guarantee employment during the 1980s and 1990s due to high levels of unemployment. During this period there was also increasing evidence that the geographical location of young people affected their life and career aspirations.

This historical examination of secondary schooling provides a useful starting point for a discussion of sociological insights into adolescence. Many researchers have been influenced, particularly in their theorising about modern formations of adolescence, by notions of class, gender, and more latterly, ethnicity in their constructions of the history of adolescence. We will consider these social constructs in the context of considering youth needs in rural and regional areas. Firstly, however, we begin by considering rural disadvantage with respect to young people.

### ***Rural disadvantage, education, and young people***

The movement of young people out of rural and remote areas has been established as a trend relating to massive restructuring across the rural and remote areas of Australia (White & Wyn, 2004, p. 59). The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines the term 'rural' according to the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia and the area of our study is considered as part of the Provincial Zone (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, & Youth Affairs, 2005). It is generally accepted that this rural restructuring has occurred due to changes in the agricultural sector brought about by the imposition/adoption of the National Competition Policy during the 1990s (Gray & Lawrence, 2001 cited in Wallace & Boylan, 2007, p. 17). These structural changes in the agricultural sector have seen rural and remote towns suffer:

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<sup>1</sup> This link between education and the needs of industry emerged again in 1994 with *Working Nation: White paper on employment and Growth* and in more recent times especially in relation to moral panics arising from industry perceptions of skill shortages (Richardson, 2007; see also Uhlmann, 2007).

a spiral of decline, [as they are] put under pressure by population losses, government policies, and reduced cash flows, and the loss of services [which] then adds impetus to the process of decline (Cocklin & Alston, 2003, p. 2).

As already mentioned, a result of this decline in rural and remote communities is that young people leave their small towns and remote communities to seek education or work opportunities elsewhere. And while youth migration from home is, according to Kirstein and Bandraike (2004, p. 1), an inevitable stage of the life cycle regardless of location, there is a tendency for this to occur much earlier and in much greater numbers in rural areas. Consequently, rural and remote areas show a wide range of patterns in terms of population ages and growth. For instance, because of this out-migration the age profile of rural communities shows an under-representation of people aged between 13-35 years (White & Wyn, 2004, p. 63). At the same time, however, many regional towns, especially those close to coastal areas, have benefited from the out-migration of both young and older people moving into them and thus creating a phenomenon called 'sponge cities' (Productivity Commission 1999, cited in White & Wyn, 2004, p. 63). Sponge cities refer to regional centres that have 'soaked up' the population from surrounding rural and remote areas. For younger people this occurs as they seek work and post compulsory education opportunities, whereas for older people it is usually in connection to their need to be closer to health and leisure opportunities not available in smaller towns.

Given these structural issues, it is not surprising then that research studies undertaken with rural young people have established that rurality is a significant factor that shapes the aspirations of young people, particularly in relation to their futures and to the possibilities they have for access to education (Bourke, 1997, p. 11; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002, p. 51; Shaw & Larson, 2003). In a report commissioned by the Higher Education Council (HEC, 1999) it was stated in the executive summary that:

Current estimates suggest that, on a per capita basis, for every ten urban people who attend university, roughly six rural/isolated Australians do so...in particular the isolated group is the most under-represented equity group in Australian higher education. (p. xv)

The HEC report was based on research undertaken with 7000 secondary school students across three states and on interviews with students from 20 rural secondary schools. The authors contend that differences in socio-economic status and whether students were from a rural or urban background were the key factors that shaped attitudes for young people when considering their future participation in tertiary education (HEC, 1999, p. 3).

Another key factor determining participation in tertiary education, is the attitudes of parents towards education (HEC, 1999, pp. 42-44). Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002, p. 43) studied the transition of students from school into the labour market, with



particular attention to the impact of family social capital on this transition. The research focussed on the ways in which the social capital resources of students' families, schools and communities influence the work/study values and priorities of the young people. According to Stone (2001, p. 4) social capital can be defined as:

networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity. Combined, it is these elements which are argued to sustain civil society and which enable people to act for mutual benefit (Lochner et al 1998; Winter 2000a); it is 'the quality of social relationships between individuals that affect their capacity to address and resolve problems they face in common' (Stewart-Weeks and Richardson 1998: 2).

This is particularly important as it has been established by local and Australian researchers that young people primarily get their information about opportunities from family or friends (Gibb, Marzano, & Watts, 2004; Mission Australia Research and Social Policy, 2005). Findings from Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) indicate:

Family social capital and to a lesser extent school/community social capital influence young people's future aspirations, but more significantly their social capital influences current work/study priorities. It is current priorities and decisions of individuals and families that determine longer term labour market outcomes. (p. 63)

This is significant to the current study because according to the National Report on Schooling in Australia, in the communities from which our participants were recruited, the proportion of people who have completed Year 12 is well below the state figures (Ministerial Council on Education et al., 2005, p. 39). In some communities, less than 10% of the population have completed Year 12 (Australian Early Development Index - Building Better Communities for Children, 2006). This would have a bearing on the encouragement that young people receive to stay on at school past the school leaving age.

This finding has resonance with the discussion outlined by Furlong and Cartmel (2007, pp. 6-8) on the ways in which social class continues to operate in a risk society. They quote Savage (2000, cited in Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) who suggests:

Reflexive modernization does not create the 'free' individual. Rather, it creates individuals who live out, biographically, the complexity and diversity of the social relations that surround them.

Thus young people scale their expectations and aspirations to fit with the 'social relations' of their communities and families. This has important ramifications when considering the kinds of social capital that are available through these various social relations. Indeed Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002, p. 63) found that family networks that were concentrated in bounded rural areas were strongly associated with the desire to find employment *before* the final year of school. This was driven by family mistrust and low levels of understanding of educational institutions, especially post-secondary educational institutions. Moreover, support for this contention regarding rural family influence (beyond the boundaries of rural Tasmania where the Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman study was conducted), can be found in other sources (HEC, 1999; Shaw & Larson, 2003).

Another significant issue is the relationship between education and employment and early school leaving. White and Wyn (2004, pp. 66-67) suggest that the:

increased importance of educational credentials in the job market has hit young people in rural communities especially hard...the lack of jobs and the restricted choices of study [have meant that] students in rural areas tend to be denied the opportunity to develop the kinds of 'mixes' of school and work that are now becoming common for urban students.

This relationship is confirmed in Eacott and Sonn's study (2006, p. 210) of young people in rural Victoria where out-migration of young people is discussed at length, despite the fact that their intention was to focus on factors not related to employment and post-secondary educational opportunities.

Early school leaving in a rural context poses particular difficulties and is related to a number of factors such as family socio-economic status and social capital, the lack of post-secondary choices and employment opportunities as mentioned above. Something as simple as the lack of a secondary school that offers Years 11 and 12 can have a significant impact on whether young people continue past Year 10. This issue has been addressed in Western Australia through a legislative change to the school leaving age (Department of Education and Training, 2007a). Even so, this legislative change will not necessarily change some underlying factors that contribute to early school leaving such as:

- Socio-economic status of student's family
- Local economic opportunities
- Attitudes of parents about education
- Financial burden on families (Barker & Milligan 1990, cited in Bourke, 1997, p. 12)

There are also significant gender differences in outcomes for early school leavers in the context of rural disadvantage. Girls are often cited as having higher literacy rates, lower unemployment rates and a higher tendency to access post-secondary schooling according to Patton (1994, cited in Hill, Hemmings, & Green, 2000, p. 26). However, this does not hold true in rural areas because young men are often more able to access employment than young women, through apprenticeships and other labouring work. There remains less scope for girls in very small towns, where there may not be significant retail, hospitality or service sectors which have been the main areas of employment for female early school leavers. The other critical issue is the level of literacy and numeracy that early school leavers attain before leaving school (Lamb 1997, cited in Hill et al., 2000, p. 26), as low levels of literacy and numeracy are key factors that limit the future opportunities for young people.

### ***Young people in the South West of Western Australia***

To this point, the discussion has centred on what is understood of the general trends for rural young people in terms of young people and their aspirations for education and employment. This section will focus on the rich body of local data about young people from various communities and sites across the South West of Western Australia.

### **Demographics**

In the region in which our study was undertaken, there were 9886 students attending secondary schools at the time of the study. This constituted 35.5% of the total number of students attending either non-government or government schools, across all years from pre-primary to Year 12, in Western Australia.<sup>2</sup> In this region the proportion of students attending *government* secondary schools was 70%, which was slightly higher than the state average of 67% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). It should be noted that the participants of this study were drawn from both non-government (35.6%) and government (58.6%) sector schools and a small number of participants were not attending secondary school (5.65%).

Just under one third of the total number of schools in the region were involved in this study. The area of the study was comprised of two education districts; Bunbury and Warren-Blackwood and there are data that map the social demographics of each locality within these districts. At the time of the study the Warren-Blackwood District in particular showed a high number of families receiving assistance in terms of the maximum rate of Family Tax Benefit Part A<sup>3</sup>, a high proportion of single mothers aged 10-24 years and a high score in terms of the SEIFA Index<sup>4</sup> (Australian Early

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<sup>2</sup> Percentages were calculated using the latest data from Department of Education and Training for Semester 2, 2007 (Department of Education and Training, 2007b).

<sup>3</sup> Families receiving the maximum Family Tax Benefit Part A have an income under \$32,485 per annum.

<sup>4</sup> The SEIFA Index is an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) tool that allows ranking of the social and economic wellbeing of each community based on the Census. The SEIFA Index is from four sets of indicators: Index of Advantage/Disadvantage; Index of Disadvantage which focuses on low income earners, relatively lower educational attainment and high unemployment; the Index of Economic Resources which includes variables that are associated with economic resources such as rent paid, income by family type, mortgage payments, and rental properties and lastly the Index of Education and Occupation which includes all education and occupation variables.

Development Index - Building Better Communities for Children, 2006). An important difference between the two districts included in this study is the impact of transitions<sup>5</sup>. Warren-Blackwood had quite low levels of transitions whereas for many communities in the Bunbury district there were high levels as well as large numbers of people receiving the Family Tax Benefit Part A.

### **Parallel developments: Youth services and educational institutions**

The issue of what to do with and for young people, at least in terms of youth services in the Bunbury and Districts area<sup>6</sup> began to emerge as an issue across the South West in the early 1980s, after a number of contacts had been made from the local community with the Youth Affairs Policy Officer. A small group of interested youth workers and others formed the Bunbury and Districts Youth Committee (BDYC) and attracted a small grant to begin developing some coordinated structures for youth work across the region. Interestingly at this point, there was little intersection between youth services and educational institutions apart from the membership of a lecturer from the Bunbury Institute of Advanced Education (now ECU, South West) in the BDYC. Indeed when looking at the outcomes of the BDYC report, we can see that the primary focus of the group was on coordination and dissemination of information to groups working with young people outside the school systems, rather than focussing on the young people themselves.

Even so, this group was perhaps the first in the area to conduct a limited amount of research amongst local young people to identify youth issues. The following issues were identified, unfortunately according to the report Bunbury and Districts Youth Committee, 1986), in no particular order:

- Finance
- Legal
- Employment/unemployment
- Recreation
- Personal problems
- Health and sexuality
- Accommodation
- Isolation
- Education
- Transport
- Minority groups

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<sup>5</sup> Transitions are measured through the ABS Census and are based on the proportion of persons living at a different address one year ago (Australian Early Development Index - Building Better Communities for Children, 2006) Transitions are significant with regard to the possibility of building social capital resources for individuals, families and communities (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; see also National Anti-Crime Strategy (Australia) & Australia. National Crime Prevention., 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Bunbury and Districts refers to the Shires of Harvey, Dardanup, Capel and the City of Bunbury even though the report refers to the South West region (Bunbury and Districts Youth Committee, 1986, p. 12).

The Bunbury and Districts Youth Committee (1986) identified its own activities in terms of those actions that took priority for them. They were:

1. Coordination
2. Information sharing
3. Community education/crime prevention
4. Advocacy/lobbying
5. Establishing priorities
6. Training
7. Research
8. Advisory body

The BDYC was the precursor to the many youth services currently operating across the South West region and which are now bought together in the South West Coordinating Network (SWYCN). A great deal of consultation with local young people across the South West has been conducted as a result of these various groups and their networking with each other, even before the advent of SWYCN in early 1999/2000.

In addition, consultations with young people have taken place at various times in the Shires of Augusta-Margaret River (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, 1993), Manjimup (Shire of Manjimup, 1994), Busselton (Shire of Busselton, 2002), Dardanup (Shire of Dardanup & Safer WA., 1999) and through the South West Development Commission (South West Development Commission, 1999). This last study was the main one that reached beyond specific, shire borders because the researchers conducted consultations in smaller shires such as Donnybrook-Balingup, Collie, Bridgetown, Harvey, Nannup and some smaller towns within shires, such as Yarloop and Brunswick Junction. The Bunbury Youth Crime Summit, conducted in 2000 by the South West District Crime Prevention Office, involved a focus group with young people drawn from local high schools. Despite some methodological differences, it is possible to gain a picture of the kinds of local issues raised by young people across this spread of time and place, because familiar themes have emerged from each study and/or consultation process.

Young people in all the studies have been asked questions about what they enjoy or like about where they live. In the case of the crime prevention studies, questions of safety and youth perceptions of crime have also been included. In all these studies, young people have expressed an appreciation for where they live and have considered their community a safe place to live, even in the crime prevention studies (Shire of Dardanup & Safer WA., 1999; South West District Crime Prevention Office, 2000). Young people have been asked what they consider as the main issues facing young people. Remarkably, despite the long time between some of the studies, similar issues have emerged. Common issues identified in these studies include education, employment, and access to transport, recreation and health services (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, 1993; Shire of Busselton, 2002; Shire of Dardanup & Safer WA., 1999; Shire of Manjimup, 1994; South West Development Commission, 1999). Top of the lists across all but two of the studies are education, employment and transport.

In addition to the issues outlined above, many of the studies have indicated that boredom is another problem facing young people. However, we should approach this finding with caution for two reasons. Firstly, it appears that this issue has a developmental aspect to it. For example, boredom primarily emerges as an issue for young people in the 15-17 year old age bracket (Shire of Busselton, 2002; Shire of Manjimup, 1994; South West Development Commission, 1999). Young people who were in the age bracket 13-14 in these studies did not indicate that boredom was such a problem for them. Secondly, in one of the few studies that went beyond the borders of a single shire, boredom was offered by the researchers as an example of a possible issue for young people. This may have skewed the results, an outcome which the researchers acknowledged in their section on methodology.

Another study that was conducted across shire borders, albeit only the northern-most shires of the South West land division, was the Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (Robinson, McCaughan, Freeman, Williams, & Toumbourou, 2002). This study differs from the consultative studies mentioned above because its emphasis was on risk and protective factors across a range of domains such as individual/peer, schools, families, and communities (National Anti-Crime Strategy (Australia) & Australia. National Crime Prevention., 1999). The Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey was designed as a tool for communities to assess the protective factors and level of risk operating in a community. Protective factors are factors such as student attachment to school, rewards for pro-social behaviour and opportunities for community involvement. This means that although the survey was completed by young people, it was really aimed at assessing the community at large rather than the adolescent *per se*. This is because young people's answers to the questions offer a picture of the risks operating in the community, in schools, for individuals and for families. It also gives a picture of the levels of protective factors that are operating across these domains.

The results of this study from across the Greater Bunbury Region (which included the Shires of Harvey, Capel, Dardanup and the City of Bunbury) suggested that perceptions about the risk of using drugs, family history of substance use and perceptions that drugs were easy to access emerged as the main risk factors (Robinson et al., 2002). Protective factors that were absent or at least lessened in the community were opportunities for pro-social community involvement and social skills (Robinson et al., 2002). Thus by considering the responses of participants in this study, it is possible to see links between risk and protective factors when discussing the issues facing young people in their communities.

### ***Summary of literature***

In summary, the indications from the literature suggest that living in rural areas proscribes the life chances of young people due to restricted opportunities, particularly in terms of education and employment. Young people tend to migrate away from rural and remote areas to further their education, and many of them do not return to their

communities post education as the employment opportunities are often not available. Those young people who do not leave to go onto further study tend to scale their aspirations to the opportunities that are available. This means that young people see TAFE and apprenticeships as important pathways into employment if they wish to stay in their communities. Other young people enter low-skill employment. Transitions between secondary schools are often difficult and are shaped by the social capital resources of young people's families and communities. Furthermore, the perceptions of family and friends are important factors shaping the decisions of young people in terms of the availability of work and further education opportunities. Parental levels of education are particularly relevant in this respect, as parents are often not aware of the opportunities and educational pathways that may be available. (As such, links between parents and school career counsellors may be an important strategy in ameliorating the impact of this for young people.)

Despite this rather grim picture from the more formal literature, young people in the local studies mentioned above value their families, their communities and the environment in which they live. Moreover many young people express a sense of safety and comfort in their communities. This sense of safety and connection to the community can act as an important protective factor for young people, and should not be overlooked as an explanation for why some young people may choose to remain in rural and remote communities at the expense of further study or higher paying employment opportunities.

In view of these indicators from the literature and on the basis of the development of services for young people in the South West that have tended to parallel rather than intersect with the education system, there was an opportunity to consider how schools might use the curriculum productively to address the identified needs of young people. This makes the current study unique in the context of previous research, as it seeks to bring together community services and education as a way to establish and address need.

## **Methodology of this study**

In this study we have investigated the perceptions of rural young people living in the South West of Western Australia. The purpose of the study was twofold: firstly, an investigation of youth needs across the region and secondly, to then examine the current curriculum to see where schools might assist young people in the transition between primary and secondary school and between secondary school and either work and/or post-secondary forms of education. To do this we used qualitative research methods, particularly data collection and analysis approaches informed by a Grounded Theory approach.

We collected our data by way of focus group interviews, undertaking these in schools, both large and small, government and independent, across the South West, with groups of young people studying University Preparation Courses, and with those outside the school system. Some of this latter group were young people who had left secondary school and were attending university but others were still looking for what to do next with their time. In total we interviewed 222 students from eight government and non-government schools. We also interviewed eight young people who were no longer attending secondary school.

In order to interview these young people, we required signed permission forms from their parents, although those over 18 years were able to provide these themselves. For most participants, this required notes to be sent home and returned. Because of this procedure the group who participated were a somewhat self-selecting group of participants; they needed to be willing and to be sufficiently organised to return their forms to schools. Although this might have led to interviewing only those who would normally be considered 'compliant', we did notice that a number of less than 'conforming' individuals participated (perhaps because they had a friend who was doing so, because they saw it as an opportunity to "get out of work" or simply because it did give them an opportunity to give their perspective – and they were very honest when they did so). In our attempts to obtain representative data we also included groups of 'disaffected' youth. As previously noted, very few Indigenous students participated by way of these focus groups. To counter this, we used data made available by one of the researchers from a school study in which similar questions were put to a large group of Aboriginal students (Oliver, Brady, & Savage, 2006).

During our focus group interviews we asked young people what they thought about their towns, their schools, their opportunities now and in the future and, lastly what they thought schools might do to prepare them for the future (the guide we used for this purpose is shown in Appendix A of this report). We used focus group interview techniques because the dynamics of the process allow the participants to explore issues that concern them most, rather than being confined to just those questions predetermined by researchers. However, when an issue did not emerge naturally, we could be guided by our interview schedule so that we could ensure that the various issues were well covered.



By following a Grounded Theory approach, a method originally developed by Glaser and Strauss for use in the health services in the 1960s (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) we could explore new and emerging issues progressively with each group. This was done in a cyclic way: as data emerged from one group we could test its veracity with another and build on this. Further, both in our data collection and later in our analysis, we were able to use a 'constant comparative method' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such we would consider, in a thematic way, the emerging issues and in an iterative fashion examine the main points until it was apparent that 'saturation' had occurred, i.e., "new data are not showing any new theoretical elements, but rather confirming what has already been found" (Punch, 1998). Although this is a highly interpretative approach, working in a team and with research assistants meant that we were able to compare our findings, not only those that emerged from within our participant groups, but between each other as researchers to ensure consistency.

Thus our findings can only properly be applied to the context from which they emerged, although inferences may be suggested for other contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2001) and so provide scaffolding for additional theorising, practice and research.

## **Findings**

The main findings to emerge from this study are described within the following themes: living in the South West; the downside of rural life; relationships to the city; schools and the school experience; teachers; school subjects; and the role of schools in preparing for later life.

Wherever possible we have used participants' own voices to capture their sentiments, with a connecting narrative to facilitate reading and contextualise the comments. As points relevant to the curriculum emerge, these have been added in separate text boxes, which refer to outcome statements from Western Australian Curriculum Council documents (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998). In this way, educators can make an immediate connection between our findings and pedagogy.

### ***Living in the South West***

We began each session by asking the young people what they liked about living in their town. They had no trouble identifying the positive aspects of their communities and the main themes that emerged were lifestyle, the environment and the sense of community.

### **Lifestyle**

Overwhelmingly, young people in this study considered the lifestyle of their town as relaxed, quiet and good for growing up. Young people expressed the view that they had lots of freedom and that they felt safe in their communities, especially when compared to young people living in Perth, and that this freedom and safety gave them independence. In the words of the young people:

You can leave your house unlocked.

You can walk to a friend's house at night.

You can walk anywhere.

Young people considered that this freedom and independence made them healthier. The group of young people who had left their community for study or work in the city also appreciated the lifestyle, although they mentioned that:

You appreciate it more when you go away.

It was apparent that these young people consider that there is 'heaps of stuff to do' in their communities. The variety of activities mentioned was enormous, ranging from individual activities such as writing stories, playing video games, listening to music and watching television, to more social activities such as going to movies, chatting through MSN, hanging out with friends, youth groups, scouts, cadets, country club (bowling), riding motor bikes, going 'piggin' (hunting pigs), 'koonayking' [marroning] and shooting rabbits:

[There's] awesome social stuff down here.

The strong sporting culture of the South West was also evident, with a wide range of sports discussed by participants. Australian Rules football in particular was very popular with both genders and for slightly different reasons. For boys, football was deemed an opportunity to play, whilst for girls it was seen as an opportunity to socialise with other young people in the town. Basketball, hockey, netball, soccer and tennis were also mentioned. A number of participants mentioned that there were fewer sporting opportunities for girls. It was also noted that sporting scouts (from Perth) rarely looked at recruiting girls for their sports, whereas football scouts (for boys) were more frequent visitors to the South West.

For those living in town the close access to social and sporting activities was commented on positively. The sport/activity of surfing figured largely in the comments of those living on the coast. Even the competitiveness between towns that emerges from sporting competitions was viewed as positive because it was seen as a way that individuals develop 'closer relationships', although it was mentioned that this was not always the case.

### **Environment**

Young people expressed an appreciation not only for safety, freedom and the variety of activities, but they also discussed freedom in the context of space in which 'to play' and as 'space to run around in'. This seemed particularly important with younger participants (12-14 years). This space enabled certain activities for young people like 'keeping horses', and there was a perception of this not being possible in bigger centres or cities such as Perth:

In Perth, they don't get to ride horses.

Other aspects mentioned by young people were fresh air and less traffic, with many praising their beachside lifestyle. Moreover, young people considered that it was 'easier to learn to drive down here' and that 'everything is really close', which was often used particularly in reference to getting to the beach and shopping areas.

The other key way young people expressed their appreciation of the environment was in their disapproval of development and destruction of bushland. Young people saw the need to 'clean up the local wetland' and 'get rid of all the rubbish'. One student expressed particular concern about global warming. It would be interesting to compare the obvious environmental awareness of our participants with a group of city dwelling young people to examine if this is an age or location determined factor.

The sentiments expressed by these young people could be easily incorporated into environmental studies as they are encompassed within the following outcome statement:

## Society and Environment

### Active Citizenship - Ecological sustainability

Shows concern for the environment beyond the classroom, school and home (developing phase); shows an appreciation and concern for all environments (developed phase)

## The community

People are more friendly [down south]

Young people overwhelmingly described their towns as friendly, tolerant and as a tight-knit community. For example young people said:

[People show] respect towards everyone

People are nice

You can develop good friendships

People are more tolerant because they have to live together

In one town, such tolerance extended to a number of gay and lesbian couples that live there, and in another it was with respect to a strong religious group that resided in the town. This also included claims of acceptance about other cultural groups living in a town, including Aboriginal families and Afghani refugees. However, occasionally the view was expressed that the communities were 'good' because there were 'not too many Asians', although this sentiment when expressed was decried by others.

For teachers, the positive comments can be acknowledged by, or in terms of the negative comments, addressed by the following outcome I don't understand this sentence:

## Society and Environment

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Understands that groups in communities have a social organization that reflects particular beliefs.

Young people generally thought the smaller the town the better:

[This was a] tighter community.

In fact one student complained that their town was 'growing so big'. Another commented on this theme of size by saying that '[this] used to be a safe little town, but it is growing everyday'.

For these young people there was a strong sense of familiarity with their communities. For example:

You know most of the people and [can] recognize everyone.

Community spirit [because] we know everyone.

For teachers this positive attribution is recognised in the following outcome statement:

**Society and Environment**

Active Citizenship - Social Justice

Appreciates the benefits of participating in community life (developed phase).

Some young people went as far as suggesting that because of these positive factors of lifestyle, safety, the environment and the people, there was less 'at risk' behaviour by young people. The reasons given had to do with the size of a small town where 'everyone knows you; even the cops know you'. This was especially the case in terms of risky sexual behaviour. As one young woman commented:

[With] only one night stands you'd have slept with everyone pretty quickly

When asked to elaborate on this it became apparent that for most young people the perception is that their town did not have risky behaviour, but other towns did. In other words the problems of teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug use, antisocial behaviour and graffiti were always worse in another town. Moreover, young people tended to use Perth as the benchmark of how bad these problems can get. For example, this comment was typical:

Problems like drugs aren't as bad as in Perth

We return, later in the report, to discuss the finding that there was a tendency to identify Perth as the often scary 'other' place.

## ***The down side of rural life***

### **Social isolation**

While many young people expressed a positive attitude towards the type and availability of things to do in the region, a minority felt there was not enough to do in their communities. Young people said it can be 'socially isolating', 'quiet' and 'boring' and that there is a 'lot to do during the day but not at night'. A common sentiment was that:

Everyone is waiting to turn 18 so we can go clubbing.

There's nothing for younger people to do but sneak into clubs.

[There's] nothing to do in winter.

It was also commonly expressed that 'parties are boring - same old people there' and that 'everybody knows about things like parties'. This raised another issue amongst participants, especially those in the slightly older age (16-17 years) group about 'hanging out' with older kids, as this was often the way younger people gained access to parties, and also to alcohol and drugs. For example:

It [alcohol] is so easy to get - everyone is friends with older people.

### **Small towns**

It was common for these young people to talk about the pleasures of small town living with regard to knowing everyone. Discussions would break out on the impact of gossip and rumours because 'everyone knows everything about everyone'. This was particularly noted by girls in the study as it raised the issue of what happens for girls if they gained a 'reputation'. Some young people felt that the attitudes of small towns were 'narrow-minded', with one participant pointing to the impact of getting older when he said:

It [the town] was great when you are young but you outgrow it.

Others described their feelings in these ways:

I don't like that you see people you don't like and you see them everywhere - it's a small town!

I can't go anywhere without people looking me up and down. In our town if you're aboriginal they follow you in the shops.

Age was significant in terms of young people's perceptions of the availability of opportunities in their communities, with older participants being more aware that there were fewer opportunities available than in large centres or cities. The other factor influencing this perception was related to the size and location of their town. The smaller

the town and the greater the distance of the town from the coastal tourist strip of the South West, the greater the perception that they needed to leave to find opportunities for work or further education. This also extended to sporting opportunities, for example, because 'scouts don't come to our region, only get as far as Bunbury'. Few of the participants in this study were working part-time and those who were tended to come from larger regional towns with high levels of part-time work in service industries, such as hospitality and retail. Young people in smaller towns also perceived that things were more expensive in their communities and that jobs in the area were 'part-time and low skilled'.

If you want to do something more you need to go to Perth or Bunbury

### **Distance and access to facilities**

Distance was another issue raised by young people in terms of getting to school, playing sport, particularly at regional or state levels, and accessing work or educational opportunities. The distance to Perth and other regional centres was a particular issue for young people and many discussed the lack of adequate transport between regional centres and even between their town and Perth. Further, young people discussed the cost of transport as being very high. In relation to sport, in particular, one student expressed how the cost prohibited some people from participating:

If someone excels in sport, it costs a lot of money to go to Perth for training. You need to be well off!

And in terms of accessing health services:

Driving to Perth for treatment when my dad had cancer and we all had to go to Perth and it was hard on all of us.

Distance impacts on the ability of young people to maintain friendships outside of their town as it is:

Hard to [have] contact with friends who live far apart

The lack of facilities in the smaller towns was also a point of comment for young people, mainly around sporting facilities or lack of them. Specific issues such as lack of astro-turf hockey fields, poor tennis courts, expensive netball fees, and facilities and skate parks that were too small were cited as examples of the lack of facilities in various towns. The criticism here was directed at the local Shires for 'only building things for adults' and spending on 'roads and speed bumps', instead of on upgrading the skate parks and doing such things as providing computers and internet facilities for young people. There were also enthusiastic discussions about the lack of choice in takeaway stores, especially in the small inland towns. The young people were vocal in their assessment of the range of entertainment and shopping opportunities. One student mentioned that there was a lack of mental health facilities in the area, especially for

young people. Another participant expressed annoyance at the way the shops in her town were closed on Sundays:

I don't like how everything shuts down [on Sundays] and there's nothing to do and if you work on Saturday and you go to school there is no time to shop.

### **Drug and alcohol use**

Although the participants mentioned that few of their peers engaged in risky behaviour – claiming that they 'never had any issues with drugs' - most acknowledged that drug use did occur in their communities. As one student said, 'It's in every town'. Some described how there was 'lots of dope smoking' and that marijuana was the 'most common drug'. Many young people had some story to relate about drugs. In one school 'magic mushrooms' were mentioned, but were then discussed as being in the next town (a common claim, as noted previously). Others described how:

Where I live you [can] walk through the bush and find a mull plant

There are even stoners at school!

Some kids trying to sell drugs at school

People take speed or 'dexies'

Mostly older participants talked about the availability of drugs such as speed. Again the common pattern was that drug use happened, but was often attributed to 'others', especially those living in the next town. Having said that, in one town young people reported high levels of concern about drug use in their own town. In this town, the Year 11 group were unanimous in their perception that drugs were an issue:

There are some bad families who do it and then want to fight other families.

Marijuana is also easy to get and [it's] cheaper than alcohol.

Parents condone dope.

Dope and stuff [is] easy to get.

Younger people are friends with older people, younger girls get older boyfriends and they get into it.

It was apparent that many participants had direct or indirect experiences with drugs. It was also clear that some had engaged in 'experimentation'. One participant suggested it occurred because of 'peer pressure', others because of parental behaviour. However, there was a view that young people could choose not to follow their parents if their parents were drug users. It should be noted that these young people did not generally include alcohol as a drug and that underage drinking was rarely viewed as 'risky', although one participant did nominate alcohol as an issue and another said 'booze'



rather than drugs was the real problem. One participant mentioned also that 'you start drinking younger [and it's] easy to get people to buy you drinks'. Drinking was discussed as part of the social life of young people in the region, especially by older participants.

*Bogans* was a term that was used a great deal by a number of the participants in all the towns and the term tended to be linked to drug and alcohol use. It appeared to be a term with negative connotations, and whilst seeming mutually intelligible amongst the participants, it was defined in various ways by different individuals. One young person described 'bogans' as people who 'come to school because they have to and they come to smoke and see their friends'. Another suggested that bogans were 'older kids that hang around with much younger kids, drink alcohol, smoke and do drugs [and] wear flannel shirts, do bog laps around town [in their] hotted up cars'.<sup>7</sup>

The health issues related to alcohol and drug use are addressed in the following outcomes:

### **Health and Physical Education**

#### Knowledge and Understandings

Understands that personal health safety and physical activity practices enhance the physical, mental emotional and social aspects of their own and others' health (Level 3).

Understands how factors influence personal health behaviours and how to appraise their own and others' health, safety and physical health practices (Level 4).

#### Self Management Skills

Uses basic self-management skills and considers long-term consequences to meet personal health and physical activity needs (Level 3).

Uses self management skills, applies their knowledge of beliefs and values and predicts the risks and benefits for the achievement of health and physical activity goals (Level 4).

### **Impact of tourism**

The impact of tourism particularly for the coastal towns was a significant source of comment when young people were asked about perceptions of their town. Mostly,

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<sup>7</sup> These descriptions are consistent with the Wikipedia definition of bogan, which is recognised as a slang term in Australia and New Zealand for someone, often from a disadvantaged suburb or rural area, who is "perceived to be uncouth, unsophisticated or of a lower-class background".

young people thought tourists were difficult and demanding. Particular cultural groups were identified as being intensely disliked. The following comments were made by participants on the subject of tourists:

They bug me.

They have no common sense.

They drive so slowly.

[Too many] crowds in the holidays.

During the holidays it's hell.

I've seen people who can't read stop signs.

Asians are taking over.

Asian tourists attracted particular comment because 'they expect you to give them discounts' and 'they don't speak the language'. Tourists were also considered responsible for a higher police presence. One student did recognise that when they went to Perth, they were tourists too, but the overwhelming sentiment was one of disapproval and dislike for tourists, even in smaller towns. Some of the older participants from coastal towns expressed annoyance that 'rich people come and buy houses and don't live there' and 'that some beach houses are surrounded by dunes so you can't see them from the beach'.

These prejudices may be addressed by the following outcomes:

#### **Society and Environment**

##### Active Citizenship - Social Justice

Treats others in the school equally and fairly,

Actively includes others from different cultures in activities and games,

Shows respect for others of different opinion, temperament or background beyond immediate friendship group/class,

Shows concern and sensitivity to people beyond their friendship group and family, initiates action to care for others (developing phase)

Actively seeks opportunities to address inequality,

Actively seeks opportunities to learn more about people of different backgrounds,

Shows and articulates concern and sensitivity towards all people (developed phase).

## **Rural disadvantage and higher education**

There was a strong feeling amongst the participants that higher education was 'easier for city kids' because they did not have to leave home or their families and friends. Others described how siblings struggled with having little money and with paying the rent, taking care of themselves and that 'moving into a (shared) house' led to 'more problems'. Indeed the lack of money available when undertaking tertiary study away from home emerged as a major issue for the participants of this study:

You can't just run home.

My brother struggled a bit with the responsibility.

## ***Relationships to the city***

As noted above, the participants often used Perth as the benchmark or point of comparison for their own community. In response to this, we pursued this topic in the interviews and discussed their perceptions about Perth and about the differences between life in the city and in the country.

This section will begin with young people's perceptions about city life. Then a description is provided about how the participants viewed the people in Perth, the experiences and opportunities available in Perth, and the cultural differences that they or people they know have experienced when they move to the city.

## **Perceptions of city life**

Overall, the main perception was that Perth operated at a much faster pace than life in the country. There was deemed to be more 'hustle and bustle', everything was 'quicker and faster' and that there were 'high levels of pollution', which made it an undesirable place to visit and to live. Young people talked a great deal about the traffic and the amount of 'traffic lights', the 'parking problems' and that due to these factors, 'it is hard to get around' and to 'drive in the city', with the outcome that 'you can get lost easily in Perth'.

These perceptions are not surprising when we consider that few young people in our study were regular visitors to Perth and also that very few had relatives who lived in Perth. In the few cases in which young people did visit relatives, their experiences seemed to confirm their original perceptions. However, this was not necessarily the case with older participants. One older participant said she had been really bored living in her town and that when she moved to Perth she experienced 'no trouble settling into city life'.

Despite some of their criticisms, the young people in this study were aware of a greater range of educational opportunities in Perth, particularly with regard to universities but

also in terms of programs such as drama. There was the opportunity to 'learn more things more quickly' in Perth and 'there's better technology' and better 'access to resources'. The participants also said that the 'smart ones from here move to Perth'. As already noted, they believed that it must be advantageous for young people in Perth because they 'don't have to move out of home to go to uni'.

The other key perception listed by the young people in this study was with regard to better employment opportunities, namely that there were 'decent jobs' in Perth; and while someone did suggest that taking advantage of this opportunity would depend on the individual, this sentiment was in the minority.

The young people were aware that Perth offered a greater range of experiences than their own towns and communities. They mentioned that this was especially the case 'if you are not good at sport', as there were a lot of other things to do for the 'shoppers and red finger nail types'. One participant also put this down to being of a certain age:

When you get to a certain point, you need more stimulation (that Perth offers) like more indoor stuff.

There was also a perception that you could gain experience living in Perth. Many commented that there was a greater range of shops and in particular take-away food stores in Perth. In addition, young people recognised that there were more things to do in Perth, such as visiting the vast number of cinemas and that this meant 'you can go to see a movie whenever you like'. In fact, some seemed incredulous that 'they' (people in Perth) could ever be bored when they had so many sources of entertainment. At the same time, however, there was also a perception that Perth was expensive.

### **People from the city**

For young people who live in towns and communities that are small, the city can be overwhelming, especially if they have had little exposure to it. Many young people expressed quite negative perceptions of people living in Perth. In particular they were almost incredulous at the sheer numbers, for example, saying things such as there were 'too many people'. In addition, the noticeable multicultural nature of the Perth community came in for some negative comments:

Too many Chinese.

Too many Asian people.

Japanese people cause all the murders.

Not many Australians there and that creeps me out.

You can play spot the Australian in Balga.

These prejudices could be addressed, at least in part, by the incorporation of teaching approaches aimed at meeting the following outcome:

**Society & Environment**

Active Citizenship -Social Justice

Actively seeks opportunities to learn more about people of different backgrounds, treats all people equally and fairly (developed phase).

Other students expressed a slightly more positive feeling towards the people in Perth, saying there were more new people to meet and that this could happen more often in Perth. Another observation made was that young people in Perth were considered 'more advanced'. This sentiment worked both ways. When asked to elaborate, the participants expressed the view that young people in Perth knew about sex and drugs earlier than did people from the country. Some young people felt particularly critical of Perth people for 'stereotyping' country people and felt that they 'assume we are dumb'.

Despite using the same criticism of Perth people, the young people tended to make quite general statements that pointed to a fair amount of their own stereotyping. Perhaps it also reflects the limited amount of contact the participants actually had with people from Perth. The following comments are typical of those expressed in the focus groups:

There are homeless people in Perth.

People in Perth spit everywhere.

More bullying in Perth.

More peer pressure in Perth and more pressure to fit in.

They're all rich in Perth.

Busier in Perth. People in the city are weird.

[People in Perth have] different values.

They are stuck up in Perth.

[They] eat lots of fast food.

Some people are whacko, crazy, and harm innocent people.

[There's] too many freaks, rapists and murderers, and rats.

Everyone is pinging on drugs.

Some of the young people also had particular views on the safety of Perth, often describing it as unsafe, even dangerous:

More violence up there.

More chance to be stabbed in Perth.

People pull out knives and there are "gangs".

[Perth] is full of graffiti.

Young people [in Perth] were more likely to be having sex.

It was not apparent on what evidence young people formed these perceptions and this was not a focus of the discussion. However, it is certainly something that could be addressed by their teachers.

### **Culture shock**

The other significant issue raised with regard to Perth was the culture shock experienced when visiting or living there. For instance, participants described the experiences of older siblings and their own experiences. Some of the comments were:

It was a shock,

There are so many more people.

My brother struggled a bit.

[Your] confidence can be shattered in a big city.

[Suddenly you are] a small fish in a big pond.

In light of their perceptions about the opportunities in their own communities and the idea that Perth offers a greater choice of opportunities in education, next we move to consider young people's perceptions of education in their own communities.

### ***Schools and the school experience***

This section covers the participants' perception of their school. Their comments include both positive and negative aspects of the physical environment; facilities and equipment; the school atmosphere and relationships; and organisational aspects of the school, teachers and subjects. It seems appropriate to begin by looking at how some of the young people transitioned into and through their secondary schooling.

### **Perceptions around transition**

The participants talked about their experiences and perceptions regarding their transition into high school, from primary school and from a district high school, and the early years in their secondary education.

### **Transition into high school from primary school**

Students (especially those in a middle school) had positive things to say about high school. In particular they described how they liked having 'different classes' and that it 'made school interesting'. Others described how they liked that they 'move around a lot'. Moreover, some expressed that 'this made school pleasurable' and that some 'almost look forward to going to school, it wasn't like primary school'. However, others described how their transition into high school in Year 8 was difficult, with some participants describing it as 'daunting', and this was especially the case because the new students 'don't know people'.

One student in a large Senior High School suggested that school would be better if there were fewer teachers (to deal with) and if it was more like primary school. Sentiments such as this provide supportive evidence for a middle schooling model. Another participant described how it was very difficult going to a school away from where you lived and because of this 'you don't get to go out and do things as much with school friends', or as another said 'you don't get to mix'. In fact, another participant claimed 'I'm never sending my kids to school in another town'.

### **Transition into high school from a District High School**

*'I'm still adjusting'*

Participants considered this a very hard transition because everyone at the high school had already made their friends, and as a consequence all students moving from the District High School 'stuck together'. Another suggested that problems occurred because the teachers knew the local kids, but didn't know the District High School students and as such they were often overlooked. Some participants suggested that an orientation like that held for the Year 7s would be useful. Clearly, schools that do not do this well need to consider how they may work better to support such transitions. It is noteworthy that one Senior High School student noted that a good thing about his school was that it went to Year 12.

### **Physical environment**

Usually the first comments from students when asked about their school involved remarks about the physical environment. Students variously described positive and negative aspects about their school, its buildings and grounds. Positive comments included:

It's pretty.

It's small.

Nice trees.

It's new.

Shiny and new.

Facilities are new.

Not too big.

While adults might not see this as a positive aspect, one student commented enthusiastically that their school had 'heaps of fights-makes it exciting, lots of adrenalin'.

Most of the negative comments centred around the appearance of the school and the impact of vandalism:

Our school looks scabby - look at the wall!

Vandalism is a big issue - some groups are big on this.

[It's] pretty shit - [they should] knock down all the old buildings.

There is kangaroo poo on the oval.

It [the school] gets vandalised a lot by people out of school.

Other participants suggested that 'some parts are unsafe' and that 'kids could get seriously injured'. Some participants did acknowledge that teachers sometimes tried to make gardens and to make the school look 'happier' by using 'more colours' around the school, but other participants thought this was a waste of time. Others suggested planting flowers and another 'fruit trees'. Lastly there was a quite adamant minority who stated emphatically that they 'hate the school' and that 'it's shit'.

### **Facilities and equipment**

Sporting facilities were often mentioned both in positive and negative terms, although to a large extent this depended on which facilities the particular school had. The following are some of the facilities and equipment that students identified at their schools, and which they described in positive ways:

Swimming pool.

A gym.

Cross country track.

The rec centre nearby.

The new library.

The library is great - [has] Girlfriend and Dolly magazines and lets you use the computers at recess.

Lots of computers.



[Our school] has a farm.

There were also a number of criticisms aimed at schools. For example, canteens received negative comments primarily on the basis that the lines were too long and that the food was often cold or of bad quality, that the prices were too high and in one school in particular, that there was often not enough food, so that if students were late leaving class they would miss out. Many students described their school as being cold because the rooms did not have enough heating. Other participants described the lack of change rooms, lockers, bag racks, whiteboards, and general equipment such as cameras and sports gear, to be a negative aspect of their school. For example, one participant suggested that 'the play equipment [was] not good'. Other participants perceived that there was a lack of security in the bike area and student parking was 'too far away and not enough'. Students also raised issues relating to maintenance noting 'broken doors; toilet roll holders; unsanitary toilets and bins that need cleaning'.

Lastly, participants included comments on aspects of their school which from their point of view made little sense. For example this comment:

Our school is a budget school, wasted 2 million dollars on a science block and cancelled science!

## **The school community and relationships**

We begin this section by looking initially at the experiences of the early middle year students and then those of the upper school students to note the contrast.

### **The early middle school years (Years 8 & 9)**

A number of the school leavers described how students in these year levels are treated badly at high school. One participant poignantly described how in Years 8 and 9 students were 'treated like nothing', and that it was clear that 'it doesn't seem that you are that important'. Further comments included that participants felt that the teachers 'don't care about you' and 'that [you] don't get treated well or respected'. Moreover participants suggested that 'you get picked on'. There were some interesting different perspectives on the movement into Year 8. Some older students did not like the actions of the current Year 8s at their school, saying that they were always 'ripping on others'. This lack of respect for fellow students is something that teachers can use the curriculum to address:

#### **Society and Environment**

##### Active Citizenship - Social Justice

Shows concern and sensitivity to others in their friendship group and family,  
With some direction takes action to care for others (emerging phase).

Shows concern and sensitivity to people beyond their friendship group and family, Initiates action to care for others (developing phase).

Others described with relief their transition back to being a junior student and that 'in primary school you have to be the role models, [whereas] here you just do what you want'.

### Upper school

Participants had generally positive things to say about their experiences of being senior students. For example, it was 'friendlier' and you received better treatment from teachers. One student mentioned that once 'you get to upper school you get privileges'. Most agreed that the experience of senior school was 'different to earlier years'. Moreover it was often the case that older students seemed to have greater loyalty to their own year level.

Although there were many positive comments about senior school, a number of the participants had negative comments to make in respect of subject choice. Generally it was agreed that there needed to be a better lead up to subject choice in upper school because 'we weren't sure' and that 'there needs to be more tasters of things'. One disaffected student was particularly eloquent on the impact of moving into his senior year, particularly with regard to the need to make choices:

I got scared when I had to make my choices [in Year 11] because I thought what if I change my mind and want to go to Uni - then I have made all the wrong choices. I worried about it a lot - for six months before and then I left anyway.

There were also many comments about the emphasis on being 'academic' and that there was 'too much pressure'.

### What makes a good school

Positive claims were made about the atmosphere of 'good' schools and they were often described as 'friendly'. In contrast 'bad' schools were seen to be 'unfriendly'. Overwhelmingly for students, good schools are seen to be 'fun' and to be good because they 'take care of you' and provided 'opportunities'. For example, students in one school commented that the 'year coordinator did a lot to help us'. If positive attributions were made about schools, for example 'it's a good school or 'I like school', generally there was also a positive claim made about the teachers. Students would comment that the school had:

Good teachers.

Good individual teachers.

[We have] strong relationship with teachers.

They [the teachers] know you.

Conversely, when asked about the negative aspects of their school, participants also mentioned teachers in this context, describing in particular the lack of a 'range of teachers' and the problem that occurred when 'teachers teach outside their area'. For example:

Mrs B she doesn't know what we know and think we know what she says [and] she doesn't know what she's talking about - she asks someone else to bust us.

Mr H, he swears, he's mean, he called Rhianne a bitch.

This was especially the case with 'relief teachers' who were largely viewed in very negative ways by all the students. Furthermore some students indicated that schools would be better if they had 'more teachers that actually liked kids' and 'that it's not good for kids to know that the teachers are only there for the money'. At a smaller school one participant believed that you could get to know teachers too well and so 'some teachers don't shut up'.

Principals were seen as good and contributing in positive ways to the school when they were more 'than a decision maker' and when they were a person 'who knows the real world' and that he/she cared for and knew his students. Comments such as these were given about the positive contributions of principals:

Knows lots of kids names.

You feel you can talk to him about things.

He pops up [here and there around the school].

On the other hand, negative attitudes were expressed about principals in terms of their distance from the everyday concerns of students, with some participants describing that they never saw him/her and didn't even know what s/he looked like. In one school students commented that the 'new principal was more like a politician (than) running the school'. Another aspect which participants commented on was what happened when there was a change of key staff. For example, students in one school described how a change of principal had resulted in the demise of previously positive aspects of their school, such as the removal of a common room for upper school students, banning 'muck up' day, and a change from 'vertical' home rooms, which had allowed students to

interact with those from other year levels. This principal also did away with the 'presentation night'. Students were passionate about the impact this had on their perception of their school, saying that they felt badly that the principal had removed 'things important to us'.

As well as teachers and principals, other staff members were also mentioned as having a positive impact. For example, the school nurse was described in glowing terms at one school, although at the same time it was mentioned that 'she isn't here all the time'.

Lastly, the relationship between teachers and other staff caused some comment, mostly in a negative way. For example:

If a teacher refers you to the school counsellor, the counsellor will ring your parents, but it should be confidential!

Some teachers let other teachers push them around and then they don't treat you right - they don't stick up for you.

#### **The role of socialising and the school experience**

When undertaking the interviews one key theme to emerge about schooling was that it provided the opportunity to socialise, but there were also fewer positive comments made about the social make-up of schools, including the issues of racism and bullying. In addition, strong expressions of dislike were made about a recently emerged subgroup called 'emos'.

Friends were deemed extremely important to this age cohort. A number of participants described their friends as being 'supportive' and 'fun', that 'if you didn't have friends, we'd all be in mental institutions'. Others described how at school 'you get to see your friends' and you make 'some good friendships'. Because of this need, some participants suggested that lunchtimes and recess should be longer, not just 'half an hour'. One group described that their school was a good school because it 'understands that peers are more important than family'. One negative comment was made in terms of 'going out with someone' from their school:

In school it's really weird if you go out with [someone] then people think you're a slut.

#### **Perceptions and experiences of racism**

Although in most schools racism was not seen as an issue for non-Indigenous students, ('we mix together'), there was widespread agreement in one town in particular that 'racism and homophobia was prevalent'. When this was explored further, it appeared

that white students considered Aboriginal students to be racist rather than the reverse being true:

Aboriginals started yelling at us for no reason

Indeed some participants made explicit statements condemning racist behaviour – for example, 'I'm against racism'. When interviewed separately as part of another study (Oliver, Brady et al., 2006), a group of Aboriginal students did indicate that they experienced racism sometimes, but primarily from teachers adding that it was 'not too many'. Others said, 'it [racism] is there a tiny bit but it's not out in the open'. Another student indicated that teachers 'treated you differently when they found out you were Aboriginal' and another Aboriginal student said it was a problem 'if you are Aboriginal but have light skin'. Some students felt that some teachers were patronizing. There was also a perception that teachers possibly lacked awareness of the cultural sensitivity of these students. For example, one Aboriginal student claimed that 'the teachers expect us to call out for help but we are too embarrassed to do that'.

Aboriginal students suggested that there is a lack of Aboriginal culture in the curriculum. They felt that texts pertaining to Indigenous issues that are included in English tend to focus on previous generations, but are not necessarily relevant to the current one. Some students felt strongly about the lack of Noongar language classes being offered and suggested that such classes would allow more interaction between each other and at the same time enhance the appreciation of their language and culture.

Another interesting facet of this aspect of schooling and the perception of young people is that although many did not see that racism against Indigenous students as an issue, it was very clear that as a group this cohort of students in the South West had less contact with other cultural groups. Perhaps because of this, tourists and Asians in particular, were described in negative ways. For example, some derogatory terms were used to talk about people of Asian decent – with one student using the term 'chogy' to describe a Chinese person. Some participants identified that the only racism that occurred in their town was not against Aboriginals, but against a new migrant group that has recently settled in their township.

#### **Perceptions and experiences of bullying**

It was evident that bullying (both verbal and physical) existed in some form to a lesser or greater extent at all the schools we visited. One participant suggested that verbal bullying was something girls do, while another suggested it was a necessary part of growing up: 'they say its gonna build your character'. A number of participants described how it was the 'same at every school', while some confessed to having been bullied themselves. Respondents had definite ideas about bullying:

Schools should do more to help [the bullied].

They (teachers) don't deal with it in high school.

Teachers are aware but they don't do anything.

[Teachers] should listen more closely.

Having suggested that teachers should listen more closely to the students who are experiencing bullying, some other participants were quick to suggest that teachers should not 'resort to touchy feely' approaches to resolving bullying issues, although they did not elaborate on what such approaches might look like.

Others described how 'people are too scared to tell'. Participants were clear that bullying can have negative effects on victims because 'it stuffs some people up' and 'it ruins some kids'. One student described how he feared 'physical violence - fights' and another student described how he was more hurt that his friends did not help him. Yet others suggested that 'friends don't know how to intervene' and that 'it would be good to teach us how to intervene'. Participants also suggested that 'ignoring bullies doesn't work' and that you need to 'defend yourself'. There was also discussion about how an older brother 'sorted' out a bully for one of the participants.

It did appear that a small number of the schools had active ways of dealing with bullying and other student issues, usually through referral to school counsellors. It was telling that when the students at that particular school discussed the fact that there was a school counsellor at the school, one student expressed surprise despite having been at the school for 18 months. Other strategies for helping that were mentioned included 'peer mediation', a program that, according to Year 10 students of that school, 'worked out well'. The curriculum documents encompass a number of outcomes that may be used to address the issue:

## **Society and Environment**

### Active Citizenship – Social Justice

Attempts to resolve differences in the group with the guidance of the teacher

Shows some understanding of the feelings of others who have been excluded or discriminated against (emerging phase)

Intervenes appropriately in situations in which another is being discriminated against (developing phase).

## **Health and Physical Education**

### Interpersonal Skills

Uses communication and cooperation skills that contribute to interpersonal and group interactions (Level 3)

Selects and plans to use interpersonal processes and the related communication and cooperation skills to enhance interpersonal and group relations (Level 4)

## Emos<sup>8</sup>

It was clear that this subgroup was not well 'accepted' by the majority of participants, that they were seen as 'different', and that 'they hang together'. In fact young people in our study were quite vocal on the subject of Emos:

[They are] depressed people.

They should take anti-depressants.

Too many Emos here - all they do is sit in their cave, slit their wrists and are hell aggro.

If you tease them, they'll threaten to cut you.

All [of them are] anorexic and bulimic.

All they want is attention.

Very clingy.

Emos are like Goths, but not so extreme.

[Emos] are the ones who got rejected and made their own group.

[All Emos have] family problems - if someone else has a problem she (an Emo friend) tells them to get over it because their problems are bigger than yours.

One participant suggested that 'everyone finds others like this as threatening', and offered a different view by suggesting that becoming a member of such a group is understandable, for example, 'if you're not good at sport, you become a Goth'.

## Organisational aspects of schools

### Flexibility

The need for flexibility with regard to a school's organisation was stressed by a number of students about a range of aspects, including timetables, class groups, the need for more 'free study periods', learning programs, start time ('school starts too early'), and the timing of recess which was 'late so you get hungry'.

Students commented that the organisation of classes made it difficult to get the chance 'to get your grades up', especially 'if you're in a class with students who did not want to learn'. Similarly a number of participants complained about 'noisy kids' and the 'naughty kids', saying that '[they should] expel the idiots'.

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<sup>8</sup> Emo began as a subgenre of punk rock music in the 1980s and the term comes from a contraction of *emotional hardcore* giving *emocore*, then subsequently shortened to the term *Emo* according to Stiernberg (2007). There are affiliated styles of music and dress that go with being *Emo* which helps to identify young people, such as tight black pants, 'hoodies' (sweatshirts with hoods) and a penchant for haircuts with diagonal fringes. Stiernberg (2007) also suggests that 'the term has also come to describe a state of mind. Many people associate emo with depression, introversion and hypersensitivity'. The term *Emo* has yet to appear in the academic literature in any substantial way.

The following comment stood out particularly with regard to this issue:

Idiots just fuck round all the time. In English class boys who are not doing TEE chuck paper around when we want to work.

Other students expressed frustration about not being able to change your mind once you were on a particular academic pathway, suggesting that 'you were stuck there' – even to the extent that 'kids who don't deserve to be in top stream stay there'. Consequently a number of participants suggested the need for careful, but flexible streaming in earlier years.

### Choices

Many participants talked about choice being a key determinant of their perceptions about their school. Some praised the electives and other programs such as music, saying 'the music program is wicked' and that it is 'better than in primary school'. Students mentioned other areas they valued such as band and instrumental (classes), dance, drama, technology, horticulture and child care. One student mentioned that her 'sister is doing a traineeship'. However, others complained that their school did not have good programs in these areas and/or that they did not get a choice in Years 8 and 9. There was a perception that larger schools offered more options. For example, one student commented that her school had 'lots more subjects than [a nearby, smaller private school]'. There was some agreement amongst the participants that the smaller the school the fewer options offered and that this could be frustrating. One student commented, for example, that 'they don't do law here in upper school'.

Other students were positive about their small classes and the attention they received in them, with 'more one on one [with teachers]', that '14 in my German class is good' and in smaller schools you were not 'just another pupil'. There seemed to be a consensus that there was an optimum size for a school – with a 'good size' being big enough for choices to be offered, but small enough to maintain the 'everyone knows everyone' feel.

An aspect of school organisation that garnered some comment was the timetabling of subjects, although the comments on this were both negative and positive. Some students expressed the wish for classes to be grouped according to desire to learn, rather than ability and another suggested that the school 'needed to timetable in ways that don't schedule hard classes late in the afternoon'. There were also mixed responses to the usefulness of form classes.

Another important issue that arose for students was the necessity for some TEE students to study their subject through the School of Isolated and Distance Education



(SIDE), but there seemed to be problems with how this was set up and there was no evidence to indicate that they had been supported to learn in this particular mode. Moreover others described the 'pressure' surrounding the TEE stream, also commenting that 'schools often seem to care only about the TEE score'. In fact, one student from a large high school described how 'it's like two different worlds in one school - I hardly know any of the names of the non-TEE students'. There was a plea made for schools to 'support the non-academic kids too'. One student made the novel suggestion that the school should be 'one week on, one week off.'

## Activities

Country Week received many nominations for its contribution to rural youth education. Other sports carnivals were also listed in positive ways. In fact, any organised interaction with other schools was viewed positively. For instance, one participant suggested that there was a need for 'more sports carnivals, so we get more interaction with other schools'. Whilst for many students Country Week itself was viewed as a recreational activity, student involvement in lead-up activities, preparation and organisation, as well as participation in the Week can address a number of Health and Physical Education outcomes:

### Health and Physical Education

#### Skills for Physical Activity

Performs movement skills with control in an open environment (Level 4)

Modifies strategies in team games and adapts tactics in response to changing conditions in physical activities (Level 5)

Similarly, 'more interschool mixing, more chances to mix with other people and schools' would be welcome. One participant suggested holding school balls with other schools if schools were too small to have their own. A school leaver described how the school ball had 'brought us all together'. At one school a number of girls noted that the focus was not just on the boys and at that school there was also a focus on girls participating in sport. Other co-curricular and extra-curricular activities such as school camps and excursions were described in positive ways. Students at one school praised the LOTE teachers for having special food nights and movie nights. When schools did not provide for activities 'outside school' this was viewed in a negative way. Suggestions were also made about providing activities during lunchtime, for example 'computer games or sporting tournaments'.

#### School rules

Generally school rules were accepted as part of the business of school and as such there was only low to moderate complaint about school rules. Complaints mainly came

from lower school students. Some of these students said, 'I hate the rules' and another asked 'who makes the rules, we should have some say in them'. Two main themes emerged when young people considered this aspect of the organisation of schools: perceptions of fairness in how rules are applied and acceptance of the need for strong rules around specific conduct such as the use of mobile phones and drugs and alcohol.

Generally, dress code was accepted by most participants:

Dress code is OK.

It's cheaper, it's good that we don't have to wear ties.

Most seemed to like the concept of uniforms and prefer them to free dress, particularly where there was some flexibility about the choice of which uniform to wear. The state law about banning denim came in for criticism, as did the choice of particular school colours, with students commenting on the folly of having to find the very specific shade of grey, or wearing black, or certain shoes. Those at schools where there were enforced, strict uniform rules seemed less accepting, especially where girls were not allowed to wear shorts or pants. One group suggested that it would be good if teachers wore the uniform, too (like teachers in primary school were perceived to do).

There was some complaint that mobile phones were confiscated because 'they might be needed for an emergency' and that 'teachers look through your bags for mobile phones'. This was seen as particularly hypocritical by one group because 'they (teachers) muck around with their own phones'. Other complaints included rules concerning the use of MP3s, about driving mates to school, riding bikes into school grounds, tipping on chairs, not being allowed inside when it was raining and not being allowed to sit or walk on the grass. One student complained about the 'no hair dyeing policy', while others felt that senior school students should be able to leave at lunchtime to go to nearby shops, or to 'go downtown more often'. Students who were given this right praised this about their school ('if you get a note you can go downtown'). There was praise for the rules in some cases due to some students being 'pretty destructive'. Similarly, others criticised their peers for their poor behaviour. However, there were issues with detention used as punishment, with students suggesting that it did not achieve anything.

## **Teachers**

The participants described, often in detail, the impact that teaching has on their learning, about how much effort teachers expended, their perceptions about the qualities of good and poor teachers, and, in turn, this led to views on pedagogical approaches.

## **Impact of teaching**

Many participants described how the outcomes of courses/subjects were highly dependent on 'who teaches you', and that teachers 'make a huge difference'. Other comments by students on the impact of teachers were as follows:

[Teachers] help make our dreams come true.

[Good teachers are] hell good.

[Teachers] inspire you.

One student described how 'in Year 8 I had good teachers and got good grades'. Conversely participants also described what happened when they did not get good teachers. If they did not have a good teacher they 'wouldn't try'. One student described how in Year Nine he had the 'worst teacher ever' in Maths and 'that had stuffed me up (for the rest of my Maths education)'. Poor teachers were described as 'gay', 'random' and 'psycho'. One student described how 'I hate all my teachers'.

Some older students recognised that if your teacher was not good, there was a need to get (outside) help such as tutoring. Lastly, students gave a plea for schools to 'employ good teachers'. We examine what participants described as 'good teaching' in the next section.

## **Expertise**

It was clear that participants in the study considered good teachers to be those that 'know what they are talking about' and their information was 'up to date'. Teachers should also be 'more experienced in their learning areas'. Experience was of particular interest as it was mentioned several times by participants – new teachers were often viewed as being less capable. The importance of being able to explain things well was stressed by the participants. In fact participants pointed out that good teachers 'teach', whereas it seemed that poor teachers were not adequately trained for their subject area and so they 'take too long to address a simple question'; often 'speak in monotones'; 'don't know what they are talking about'; or sometimes 'reads from the text-book'. Finally students suggested that you can tell when they 'know what they are doing' and when they 'can't explain things', and 'haven't been taught how'.

## **Personal qualities of good teachers**

The most often mentioned personal quality that participants saw as praiseworthy was a 'good sense of humour', when a teacher was able to be 'fun', and 'tell funny stories'. Participants particularly welcomed teachers who could have a joke and also 'take a joke'. Other qualities considered important were 'trustworthiness, a sense of safety and respect for students':

[Teachers who] trust you and everything like that.

Someone who is safe to be around and that we can talk to about anything.

Relaxed.

Other suggested positive qualities included being:

Passionate about what they do.

Friendly.

[Fair so as to] make things equal.

[Teachers who are] treating people equally and who show respect.

Participants stressed that teachers should show respect by 'treat[ing] me like a person' and 'like an individual'. Good teachers 'won't make fun of you if you don't know the answer' and they 'build relationships' and 'develop positive relationships with the students'. Good teachers 'relate to you' and 'not like a big pack'. Some respondents said that as they got older teachers treated you more like adults, but they also recognised that at times 'because we acted like kids we were treated like kids'. It was also noted that teachers who were friends with you outside school tended to be better in school. For example, one student described how his teacher was also his football coach, while other comments included:

I have a teacher as a friend from Primary School and she visited us in Year 7 and gave us presents.

Mr H knows me - he knows my dad, I have a teacher as a friend.

Good teachers were also 'interactive' and 'more in touch' with their students and so consequently 'know how far to go'. Participants were clear that this building of relationships could occur without teachers 'acting young', because they just needed to remember/understand what it was like to be young. Good teachers avoided humiliating their students and did not do things to embarrass young people, such as making the young person 'stand up to do things'. Good teachers 'not only care about you, but they care whether you do well or not' and so would 'go out of their way to help you'. In fact 'helping', like the attribute 'humour' were frequently used adjectives for good teachers.

### **Attributes that contribute to poor teaching**

In contrast to those characteristics described above, poor teachers were described as not showing respect, they were also inconsistent, untrustworthy and showed favouritism. A selection of the respondents' comments is included below. Describing the

kinds of behaviour and attitudes that characterised poor teachers certainly exercised the participants' descriptive powers. They had a lot to say and many examples to share:

They [the teachers] say to respect them, but then they don't respect us.

They tell us to shut up.

They swear but they won't let you swear.

[Teachers name] picks on me - swears at me.

They don't listen and are deaf.

Won't let us sit with our friends - we should be allowed to sit with our friends.

Don't give you a chance to defend yourself (if you get in trouble).

Get cranky.

Grumpy old bag.

If you rock your chair he's mean.

One of them rang up my parents and lied to my parents, which wasn't OK.

Some teachers, according to participants, 'scream', 'scare the crap out of us' and are 'weird'. There was criticism of those teachers who were not consistent and who 'growl a lot', 'make a fight [with you], '[are] constantly at you and are therefore 'annoying':

Ms [teacher's name] is PMSing all the time

In one school the students were vocal about the lack of trust they experienced from teachers saying that they have to get their 'diary signed to go to the toilet!'

Quite a number of students commented on teachers who did not dress appropriately. This included dressing too young for their age, wearing low cut tops, wearing ugg boots and track pants (apart from Physical Education staff). There were claims too, that poor teachers 'make up stories about you' and instead of being fair, show 'favouritism' and are 'biased'. In fact, one student was so concerned about favouritism, he suggested that names should not be on work. Another described how demoralising some teachers' treatment of students was, giving an example of practices such as giving back papers 'in order of worst to best results'.

Teachers who punished excessively for minor misdemeanours and who demonstrated poor 'self control' were singled out as being particularly problematic, not least because participants commented that these kinds of teachers will say things like 'I'm watching you', and they would 'go on and on' when you did something wrong. There was an

interesting perspective expressed by a few in a Year 8 group – that bad teachers had a problem with themselves. One participant related a poignant story about a drama teacher who, after sending the student from the class following a minor altercation about footwear, then proceeded to mimic the student to the class.

Lastly there was some disagreement about the optimum age of teachers. Sometimes younger teachers were seen as good because they could relate to you and 'know where you are coming from', however older teachers were also described as good because of their experience and 'control'. In contrast, some participants commented that 'some should have retired by now'. One student said 'He [the teacher] is ancient, even my mum said so, and he gets cranky'.

### **Classroom approaches**

The comments on personal attributes of teachers lead into discussion of what works in classrooms. The main theme here is that good teachers were considered consistent and helpful. Moreover, good teachers were 'creative' and 'mentally challenge' students. Control of the classroom was of particular importance for participants, as it was difficult to concentrate when other kids 'muck up and the teachers don't do anything about it'. One student called for 'more firm teachers' and, that there was a need for 'someone who will use consistent discipline without punishing the whole class for one person's behaviour'. Students commented that a good teacher was 'kind, understanding and at the same time, strict' and was 'someone who explains rules and explains their decisions around punishment'. One participant suggested 'school isn't hard enough on bad kids', but conversely, another suggested that a good teacher 'lets us off for minor things'.

There were several implied criticisms about teachers who worked in a lock-step fashion without taking into consideration the individual abilities of students in a class: 'they expect you to keep up' and 'people who can, do it, they push them and we just drag behind'.

One of the most startling findings was that something as apparently simple as 'if you ask a question, they give you the answer' to students was especially noteworthy. Good teachers were ones who listened to the question, gave the answer and did not 'dribble on about different shit'. These teachers also did things like 'reward you for doing your work', did 'stuff we like', and made subjects 'interesting' and 'relevant'. Additionally, an attribute of really good teachers was that they 'listen' and this was mentioned many times, clearly indicating that good communication skills were seen to be particularly important to the participants.

Students commented that 'you can tell when a teacher is having a bad day at home, someone will do something little and they'll overact'. Indeed with one older class group, we had a lengthy discussion about how sad it would be to spend your day at your workplace screaming at people, which was apparently a common occurrence in that school. Other students suggested that 'if a teacher is angry kids muck around more'. It was acknowledged that some groups would be hard to teach, and that Year 8 and 8 classes would be particularly difficult.

The emphasis on communication also came up with respect to teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds. There were several comments about the problems students experienced in understanding teachers who came from places such as Europe and Africa - 'we don't understand the teacher, he's French with an accent' and another comment was 'he needs to learn English better'. It is possible that these perceptions occurred because of rural students' lack of familiarity with people from a non-English speaking background.

Finally, homework came in for some comment and here the criticism centred on the issue of setting too much unnecessary homework. Students also commented on the lack of flexibility when it came to the issue of homework. For example, some students were critical of teachers for not understanding problems relating to family issues, the demands of part-time work and that unforeseen circumstances could prevent homework from being completed. Similarly 'keeping students busy' with 'random stuff' just for the sake of it was viewed very negatively.

### **Pedagogical approaches**

Students praised teachers whose methods involved explanation, particularly with a focus on 'understanding' and with illustrations on 'how to'. Students viewed learning as not just 'to regurgitate', for instance:

I hate history because of the whole remember this date.

Good teaching led to learning and this was achieved by understanding. For example, while Maths teachers came in for their share of criticism, one 'leaver' described how his Maths teacher had been really good because 'he taught us to do things the long way first so we understood it', in contrast to doing everything on a calculator without understanding. In fact, the overuse of calculators came in for quite some criticism. In addition, poor teaching involved too much 'writing off the board' and when teachers 'talk too much'.

Others described how good teachers 'take time - if someone was having trouble she would finish what she was doing and help them'. Participants suggested that good teaching involved making subjects 'interesting' with topics you could 'get involved in'.

In particular, students seemed to value teachers who made classes 'enjoyable' for everyone and 'not just the smart kids'. Clearly, learning for these students needed to be relevant - 'otherwise what's the point?' Participants suggested that teachers who 'draw on' the students' existing knowledge using approaches that were active and 'hands on' and that balanced general work with practical work, 'using group work' or 'getting out of school and doing things' such as going to the 'rec centre' were welcomed.

Other suggestions included that good teachers should let the students have more freedom, let them make their own mistakes in order to encourage learning, provide opportunities for autonomy, 'such as choosing which subjects to study' and that 'teachers should be more negotiable'. One 'leaver' did say, however, that in their opinion the problem was that 'we've been entertained too much'.

It was interesting, too, that students criticised the convention of 'just sitting and reading a book', as though this is not an active past-time. In the context of the classroom, students were critical of approaches that saw them just reading and answering questions. Their comments included:

Read the book, answer the questions.

If everything is just out of a book, you don't learn anything.

Some students went as far as to suggest that 'teachers from high schools need to talk to primary school teachers' because as another suggested, 'I learnt more in primary school' and we did 'thinking skills' there, but we 'don't get to use any of it here'. Participants also felt that there was a lot of unnecessary repetition and suggested that teachers 'don't keep continuing on what we've [already] learnt in primary school'. Lastly, poor teaching also involved putting time and effort just 'into good kids' and that there were a lot of students who 'aren't that brainy but try hard, [but] teachers don't really care'. It was suggested that the school would just 'send you to a traineeship'. Similarly others, in particular one Year 8 group, suggested that teachers needed to put more effort into the students who were struggling because:

It's not their fault they are struggling, but kids who are put into their classes, they just haven't learnt that well. Teachers seem to give up on them a bit too easy.

Others suggested that it was the students 'in the middle' that got overlooked.



## **Subjects**

Almost all school subjects were nominated by different individuals as being good courses to learn. Negative comments were received mainly about core subjects and LOTE. The active, hands-on subjects such as Physical Education/Sport ('you can do surfing') and electives such as Technology and Enterprise (for example, 'industrial workshop' classes) received a great deal of praise. Other subjects that were also described in positive ways included metalwork, computing, cooking, photography, jewellery making, woodwork, art and farming. Particular skills that these subjects offered students also received a lot of praise.

The following discussion outlines some of the key comments made about particular subjects.

### **English**

The selection of texts was seen as key to whether this subject was deemed useful or not. A good text which had a good 'life lesson' and 'prepares you for life' was considered useful for the future, whereas poor selection of text meant that English classes were uninteresting and 'boring'. Students suggested English 'needs to cater for' students' interests. For some participants there was a strong view that the skills taught in English could 'set you up for life', whereas for others the analysis of texts was not seen as very useful at all and quite a number asked rhetorically 'what is it for?'

The 'viewing' strand was described as 'very valuable', noting that when you 'break it down' you can see 'how (a text) is constructed'. Watching 'movies' in English was considered a good thing. One of the 'leaver' participants described the need to be taught the skills of essay writing, again reflecting a call for the 'how to' of learning as well as the need for opportunities to develop good 'oral skills'. This need in particular could be addressed by the following outcomes:

#### **English**

##### Listening and Speaking

Considers the appropriateness of text form and register and the conventions of non-verbal communication in relation to audience when listening and speaking in familiar situations (Level 4)

Identifies the verbal and non-verbal structures and conventions used by speakers to influence audiences and experiments with them when constructing their own spoken texts

Selects, applies and adjusts strategies for monitoring and improving communication in a range of contexts (Level 5)

Some participants also suggested that more should be done in this area, with a few claiming that 'communication' skills were not covered at all. Others described the fun in doing writing, stating that they 'like English because [they] like to write stories'.

With respect to the development of oral communication skills, the following resources developed with teachers in previous projects may prove useful:

Oliver, R., Haig, Y., & Rochecouste, J. (2006). Oral Language: Tackling Talk in Schools. Perth, WA: Edith Cowan University.

Oliver, R., Haig, Y., & Vanderford, S. (2006). Tackling Talk Through Action Learning. Perth, WA: Edith Cowan University.

Oliver, R., Haig, Y., & Rochecouste, J. (2005). Tackling Talk: Teaching and Assessing Oral Language. Perth, WA: CALLR, Edith Cowan University.

Oliver, R., Haig, Y., & Rochecouste, J. (2004). Tackling Talk. (Action research website: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~lingwa/TT/>), Perth: Edith Cowan University.

Oliver, R., Haig, Y., Rochecouste, J. & McFarlane, J. (2002). Developing the Communicative Competence of Students for Social Interaction through a Learning Module. (CD ROM and Video) Perth: Edith Cowan University.

These references also may be useful:

Oliver, R., Haig, Y., & Rochecouste, J. (2005). Communicative Competence in Oral Language Assessment. Language and Education, 19, 3, 212-222.

Oliver, R., & Haig, Y., & Rochecouste, J. (2004). Adolescent speech networks and communicative competence. English in Australia, 141, 49-57.

## Maths

Generally, the most vitriolic opinions emerged about Maths. A number of students said that they 'hated' Maths, claiming that it was 'dull'. Some of the comments are listed below:

Every time I had double Maths, it was like torture - I didn't think I'd come out of the other side alive.

I reckon a lot of Maths we don't need.

We need like 20% of what we get taught.

All Maths teachers are bad because they didn't explain.

That it was not an ideal learning environment.

The lights are on, but it is still dark.

Others expressed the opinion that Maths done at school was irrelevant - 'like do we need algebra?' and 'what does chance data have to do with anything?' Indeed, Algebra was mentioned several times in the context of relevance and even those who liked the 'brain exercise', did not necessarily see its relevance. Others suggested that 'non-TEE Maths is more relevant' and 'practical'. There were many calls for making Maths more practical and relevant to 'everyday life'. Even so, some participants had high praise for their particular teacher (see comments about pedagogy above) and there were a few who clearly enjoyed Maths, stating rather tellingly, 'I love it cos I can do it!' One student suggested having 'Maths competitions across the school'. Clearly there is a need for teachers to carefully consider how to make links between the content and understanding in the curriculum and the need for students to make links with their current and future life and work experiences.

## **Society and the Environment**

Most students thought this subject was useful and that it offered 'some things you need to know like politics and laws'. Some TEE students described Accounting as their favourite subject, and another Economics because 'it prepares you for later life'. On the other hand, some could see no relevance whatsoever:

What happened in medieval times? And what do we need to know for?

One student commented on what she perceived to be the parochialism of history, saying that 'there is too much Australian history and not enough world issues/history'.

## **Science**

A significant number of participants said they liked Science, commenting that 'it's just awesome'. Some liked the hands on approach and others the environmental component. Many TEE students liked Biology and Human Biology. However, others did not like Science at all.

## **Religious Education<sup>9</sup>**

There was praise for the 'morals' and attitudinal material covered in Religious Education. Students welcomed opportunities to 'talk about life and stuff' undertaken as part of the course in upper school because it was deemed 'relevant' and 'gets you thinking about what sort of person you want to be'. Some described it as a good way to promote student/teacher relationships and that the 'bible helps us because if we have questions in our head it can provide answers'. At the same time, however, the

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<sup>9</sup> Only students from independent schools commented on Religious Education.

'bible stuff' came in for criticism from other students, who suggested it 'would be more enjoyable if we discussed it or debated it; instead we are forced to listen to it'. Other students did not see the course as having any 'relevance', that it 'doesn't set you up for life' and finally that it 'doesn't help you at all'. Lastly one student suggested that that the course was 'a joke' and that it seemed to be taught by 'random teachers'. There were some strongly negative comments about this area including:

Hate the Eucharists.

[I] would wipe it off the curriculum if I had the choice; should make it optional for the church kids and then the others can do sport.

### **Languages other than English (LOTE)**

This area of the curriculum was criticised because of the methods that were used and because of the lack of relevance to their lives, with many students feeling that they were 'forced' to do languages in which they were not interested. At one school, students were particularly upset at having to learn Afrikaans, which appeared to be almost universally disliked by the interviewed students at that particular school. One student commented:

If we are going to learn a different language, it needs to be relevant to our needs, not just because there happens to be a teacher who can speak it.

[We need] to learn languages that are regionally relevant, such as Indonesian.

Some suggested just having a taster for one semester to see which language they liked, or whether they even wanted to do LOTE. As noted, some Noongar students interviewed in a previous study (Oliver, Brady et al., 2006) decried the lack of Noongar language classes. Similarly they asked why there were signs around their school in Japanese and French, but there were none in the language of the traditional land owners.

### **Physical Education (PE)**

Both the teachers and the school PE courses were highly praised. Indeed at one school the girls expressed gratitude that the focus was not just on the boys' sports. Others commented that the Health and PE staff and canteen had combined well at their school to combat obesity. Knowledge such as this is reflected in the current curriculum documents and teachers can therefore use this to inform both their teaching and their assessment procedures.

**Health and Physical Education**

Knowledge and Understanding

Understands how factors influence personal health behaviours and how to appraise their own and others health, safety and physical health practices (Level 4).

Understands the consequences of action taken to enhance personal and community health safety and physical activity and to avoid or reduce the risks associated with lifestyle behaviours (Level 5).

### Self Management Skills

Applies self management skills analyses risks and benefits and plans for the achievement of personal and group health and physical activity goals (Level 5).

In upper school at one school, the 'Recreation Course' was praised, as was the surfing class at another school. At a third school, upper school students suggested that sport should be compulsory in Years 11 and 12 and that 'the beep test (a type of fitness test) is good. You compete against yourself, not others'.

However, at one school sport was talked about in very negative terms:

Don't like sport very much because I am not good at it/not sporty.

Don't like sport because teachers are too tough on us.

## **Health Education**

Although positive comments were made about this subject, including the recognition by students of the 'need' for it and that it 'is good for the future' and 'it prepares you as well as it can', many claimed that 'they do enough in health'. There was also criticism about how it was taught, with students making the following general comments:

It's a bit repetitive.

Should leave it alone.

We are pretty much doing the same things each year.

[It's] embarrassing when we have to do funny stuff [with condoms and carrots].

We've been doing pregnancy since Year 8.

We mainly do drugs and alcohol.

Some students thought that 'no-one really cares' and that 'it's not a challenge anymore'. The other key message was that just saying 'don't do it' did not work. Others felt there was 'not enough' done about drug education and that the 'for's and against's' and what it does to you should be included in class coverage of these topics. Some

went as far as to say that they felt you learnt most in the playground, rather than in the Health Education class. Other students felt that 'the school should do more, but couldn't do anything' and further, that 'it's our choice, they can't do much'.

There was some discussion about the need for Health Education classes to help students work to develop better communication in families, especially about drugs and sexuality. Some did feel that although these topics were important, they were sometimes done too late. There was a 'need to start in the younger years when students are involved in those things', at appropriate developmental times, 'so you'll know how it affects your body and organs'. Others suggested that Health Education was taught 'in tiny bits' and that there was a need to do such topics 'in more depth',

The other area that garnered criticism was that teachers who taught this subject were sometimes not skilled or comfortable with the subject matter and that in many schools, 'we don't have a designated health professional' who might teach Health Education. For example, there was a general acknowledgement that Sex Education should be taught by teachers experienced and proficient in teaching the subject and that it should occur at the optimum time. As such, students commented that Sex Education was currently done at a set time with little consideration of whether or not the time to introduce this topic was appropriate:

Some schools don't teach enough about Sex Education, but they need to be more mindful about when to teach and how to teach these issues (e.g. sex).

Schools need to be able to address issues such as sexuality.

In some schools, primarily the faith-based independent schools, sex, drugs and alcohol were not really covered, according to the students. For one group in particular this was considered a problem, as they were seeking information on a range of issues such as 'how to look after yourself', personally as well as in relation to drugs and alcohol. Others claimed that teachers did not wish to acknowledge that these things (sex, drugs, alcohol) were 'already happening' and that students needed to be taught to respect themselves. One student suggested that the topics covered in class should be a parent responsibility, but in the same discussion others countered this point, saying that parents may not be there or even able to discuss such things because of lack of knowledge themselves.

### ***Life after school: The role of schools in preparation***

The participants talked about their experiences and perceptions regarding the issue of how well schools prepared students for life once they had completed their compulsory years of education. Although there was praise for some teachers and subjects or specific programs provided at some schools, many participants expressed concern that

their school did not provide adequate 'life skills' training, adequate or appropriate career counselling, or sufficient opportunities for personal development. We begin the discussion below on the issue of life skills.

### **Life skills**

In many of the focus groups, the topic of life skills emerged as something that was of concern to the participants, with a number stating that they felt inadequately prepared for life after school. For example, a number of the students in this study thought that they were 'pretty sheltered', with not much exposure to the world, and that the school did not adequately prepare them for life once they finished school. This was especially evident amongst participants from smaller schools and towns because there were deemed to be only limited chances for learning social and interaction skills outside of school. Comments included:

Let us out into the world more.

You don't get the full spectrum of skills - like they teach you Maths but not about how to vote for example. We had nothing about the political system the whole time I was at school.

The issue surrounding the development of social skills was viewed in a different way by another participant. His comment emerged in relation to a discussion about bullying:

[School] teaches you survival - some people want to fight you and you have to know what to do, you have to be bullied to be prepared for later life [because] if you're at work and it happens you need to know how to handle it.

Another participant who had left school and was employed full-time expressed the following about bullying:

I don't think they [the teachers] helped you with the bullying - if you tell, you are dobbing and it's the same in the workplace - but how do you deal with it [said with frustration] like without violence or aggression and on your own, you get set up to be weaker.

Again, preparing students to deal with these situations is reflected in the following outcome:

### **Health and Physical Education**

#### Interpersonal Skills

Uses communication and cooperation skills that contribute to interpersonal and group interactions (Level 3).

Selects, applies and adjusts interpersonal processes and the related communication and cooperation skills to actively participate in making and evaluating interpersonal and group decisions to achieve goals (Level 5).

In addition to the development of social skills, older participants suggested that classes about 'looking after yourself' would be good and another suggested implementing a course about 'practical stuff', such as 'how to live independently'. Some of the other suggestions related to this included courses with lessons on:

- How to take care of a car
- How to write a resumé
- How to plan a holiday
- Learning about different cultures.

A student who had a sibling with a disability outlined her desire for schools to provide all students with information about conditions such as autism. An older participant, who had left school, said she wished teachers were more educated about 'difference', saying:

I don't think some teachers are educated enough to be teaching, in social stuff for example... and I wish my teachers had known more about learning disabilities. I was teased by some teachers in front of other kids and singled out as a drug user, which then let the other kids be nasty to me. I don't think teachers are taught enough about how to deal with adolescents.

The issue of 'difference' is certainly something that could be easily addressed, at least in terms of the curriculum (as indicated above).

There was a strong view on the part of a number of the participants that nothing about school prepares them for later life:

I don't know anything about living by myself and (about) life.

Others disagreed:

Lower school doesn't prepare you for leaving school, but that's all they do in Year 11 and 12.

However, one student suggested that 'more study time and more discipline prepares you for work'. Yet another student provided an example of how a Maths teacher had done 'budgeting' and this was viewed in a very positive way, because of the life preparation it provided. Although this may be seen by some teachers to be outside the



parameters of the curriculum, in fact in an applicable way it reflects quite a specific Maths outcome:

## **Maths**

### Number

Understands the meaning, use and connection between the four operations on whole, decimal and fractional numbers and uses this understanding to those appropriate operations, including those in which fractional and decimal multipliers and divisors are required.

Similarly when a participant described how her school 'teaches you how not to waste money' other students expressed their appreciation about this because of the preparation it provided for when they left school. Interestingly, students claimed that non-TEE students were better prepared because they learnt about things like 'bank loans'. There was agreement that if you were doing TEE there was no room in the curriculum for such life preparation classes. Another student asked for 'time management' development. This led into a discussion of the need for students to be given more responsibility. Lastly, a major suggestion that emerged from this topic of discussion was about the need for more driver education to be done through schools (especially aspects of safety). This suggestion was met by other participants with great enthusiasm.

## **Career education and maximising opportunities**

In our discussion with the participants it is clear that Career Education is less than consistently provided in the region. While some participants in some schools provided a positive picture about the Career Education they received at their school, there were many others who claimed that there was insufficient attention paid to this aspect of their education. Some of the positive comments were:

[The] school does this.

We do a big career thing about what you want to do.

We [have] learnt about resumés.

Denmark Ag[ricultural] School came to talk to us.

Some unis came to talk to us about things like medicine.

They brought in mining people to talk to us.

SOSE is fun now we are doing careers.

The main criticism focussed on the lack of opportunities to explore various options. One participant suggested holding 'career camps' and another suggested that 'they should bring things (like work courses) to [name of town]'. Despite this, others described how schools were pushing girls away from some traditionally female occupations such as hairdressing and beauty therapy, although not all agreed that this was necessarily a good thing:

Girls should be able to do more beauty things if they want to.

They push girls away from hairdressing.

They don't want girls to be hairdressers or beauty therapists - it does matter what you look like.

Another issue students raised was that, although there were career counsellors in schools, there was still a need for more education about careers. One student described the process of career direction provided at her school:

(We were) separated into uni and TAFE students and then went through the job guide.

One of the interviewed students expressed frustration at the lack of articulation between his proposed life path and the courses offered at his school. For others the articulation (or lack thereof) and relationships with TAFE were described in various ways, with some students indicating that there were adequate pathways between school and TAFE, whilst other students suggested that their school needed to develop more pathways into TAFE. For example, some of the students praised their schools because they were 'doing a good job' in this area by making available 'Certificate 1 courses'. The relationships developed between some of these South West schools and institutions of higher education and vocational education still depend somewhat on the ability of teachers to make workable links and to have knowledge of the possibilities. The difficulty for teachers is that these aspects are not related to assessment procedures implied by the outcome documents, and as such they can be problematic to accommodate within an already tight curriculum.

At the same time, however, students expressed frustration about not being assisted to understand their own aspirations:

How are we going to know what we want to do?

Asking you at 13 what you want to do means you might want to be an astronaut!

Why can't we have a place where you can go and learn about education choices like a job advisory - maybe where you can get vocation tests to see where your talents lie - I mean you can have no idea what you might be good at even after you complete Year 12.

One TEE student described how she wanted 'more work experience like the TAFE kids, so you can work out what you like' and another called for 'more workplace experience'. It also seemed that while TAFE-destined students appeared to receive direction, many students expressed doubt about what happened if they changed their mind. One student spoke about this at length and she described how there was a need for more information to be given about bridging courses and TAFE entry. Her points are supported by comments from a TEE student, who said she needed to know about other options should she fail to gain the score that was required to study her chosen course. It was clear that the students, particularly those doing TEE courses, continued to see the TEE as a one-shot only option for their chosen career and that little information was given to students about other ways to gain University entry:

[Name of school] talked a bit about Uni but really emphasised TAFE.

This was highlighted by the reaction of the students when asked if they knew about portfolio entry to university, with fewer than ten indicating they had heard of it. In response, one student also described how her school was really competitive and so felt that the school actually did not 'want them to see there are other options'.

While discussing the move to higher education some participants claimed that school was good preparation for university because 'the school can organise you to go to a university if you want to'. However, there was also criticism from a number of young people in this study because there were no 'independent living type subjects for TEE students', despite the fact that this group of students were the most likely to need such input due their need to move to Perth for study post-TEE. There appeared to be no specific subject outcomes to address this and so schools may need to design creative solutions to satisfy this need.

One 'leaver' described how living at a residential college made the transition away from home easier, particularly as it was easier to meet people. Another participant suggested:

It's good if you have a family (there) as a place to stay.

Another student made a suggestion that met with a great deal of enthusiasm from her peers, namely that instead of camps to regional centres, senior secondary students could have a camp to Perth:

To familiarise the students with the place - [it could work like] 'ace around Perth' to learn about transport and places and how to get to various locations.

## Interpersonal relationships

When students were asked questions about life preparation, their answers fell into two broad categories: careers and relationships. From this we can see that these young people recognised that social skills were an important aspect of what they needed to be learning. A considerable number of the participants felt that their school did not adequately cover 'relationship' skills. The social isolation of some of the participants and their need for social development was quite evident in the discussions:

I don't get along with many people especially teachers - I have an assistant.

It was suggested by a number of school leavers that this social development was a key area they needed help developing, and further, that their understanding in this regard had become more apparent in light of their experiences post school. The specific comments on this issue were:

[We should learn more] about relationships.

[Need more on] getting on with people.

[More] about growing up.

However, some students conceded that they 'sort of did that in Health' and others indicated that 'you learn more about that by being exposed to it' and that you 'couldn't have a class on this'. Another student argued that this is not the responsibility of the school and that:

[The school does not] really teach us about relationships; we talk about friendships and community, but it comes through doing sport, camps and from our teachers who relates [sic] to us.

Perhaps the issue, summed up here by one participant, is about the need for 'more open discussion among [the] school community to manage relationships, bullying and appropriate ways to express affection among friendships, for example, boyfriend/girlfriend'. One upper high school student from a fairly small and protective school made the suggestion that 'more interschool mixing, would better equip one for life after school' and this would enable 'more chances to mix with other people and schools'. Similarly, students from another school were of the opinion that their school did not prepare students for the realities of life because it sheltered them too much and was 'a bit over-protective' and therefore this 'does not prepare you for the real world'. Another student indicated how important schools were because at school 'you get to make friends that you can have later in life.'

Despite some participants indicating that schools failed to address this area, developing relationships and working together in collaborative ways is implied and sometimes explicitly stated in a number of curriculum outcome documents. For example:

## **Health and Physical Education**

### Interpersonal Skills

Selects and plans to use interpersonal processes and the related communication and cooperation skills to enhance interpersonal and group relations (Level 4).

## **Society and Environment**

### Active citizenship - social justice

Actively seeks and/or creates opportunities to participate fully in the life of the school and the wider community (developed phase).

## **Aspirations**

Whilst some students expressed particular aspirations, such as becoming a footy player, to play AFL, study environmental science, do sports science, study geology at the School of Mines in Kalgoorlie, become an events coordinator or to go to Perth to study, there were many more who simply had no idea what they wanted to do. Although a number indicated that they would be going to Perth for further study, most were vague about the courses they wanted to do. As already noted, a number had a very narrow or no understanding regarding alternative entry pathways to university and many were equally uninformed about TAFE options. More than what they said, it was what they did not say that was significant. Few, if any, talked about travel and only one spoke of travelling around Australia. One student was definitely not keen, saying, 'the furthest I have been is Cue and all my family is here so I don't want to go anywhere. I feel it's unsafe overseas'.

As indicated earlier, the participants had a strong tie to their communities and for many, their aspirations centred around living and working in ways that allowed them the opportunity to stay in the region. Despite this, there was an underlying awareness that opportunities were probably more numerous elsewhere. This presents many young rural people with something of a conundrum when it comes to considering their future.

## **Conclusion**

In this research we interviewed, via focus groups, 230 young people in the South West of Western Australia. Using a Grounded Theory approach, we worked to identify the needs and perceptions of young people in this region. In particular we examined their feelings about their community, their school and their futures. As such, this study has a sociological orientation. In this final section, we identify some key areas which emerged from the study. In turn, these can act as scaffolding for considering further the ways in which the current Curriculum Framework can be used to enhance and support the education of young people in the South West. In addition, this section suggests some ways forward for additional research and for policy work. We expect that this work may impact upon the young people themselves, their parents, educators, politicians and other human service professionals concerned with maximising the school experience.

### ***Summary of key findings***

#### **Community and locale**

The findings from the study show that these young people initially saw their towns and communities favourably. The feelings of safety, the physical space and access to natural spaces, such as beaches and a sense that their community was friendly and tolerant were often contrasted with perceptions about metropolitan areas, which were seen as potentially unsafe, crowded, dirty and impersonal. Young people did express particular concerns where they saw their communities being 'altered' in some way, either by rapid urbanisation and the associated loss of public space, or by the sense that the close knit feeling of their town was becoming fragmented. While many good things were reported about their communities, there was a perception that implied that as people become older, their needs change in ways that small communities are often unable to meet. For example, it could be stated that in some cases the need for access to sporting, educational, social and recreational activities outstripped the capacity for some communities to provide these. In this sense, Perth was seen as the site for meeting such needs, even though many young people either did not see themselves as living or studying in Perth, or had little understanding as to how to access those facilities. As such, while the rural and regional locations were perceived as having some positive attributes, these were limited in terms of the facilities, resources and pathways necessary for realising the needs of some young people.

#### **The school experience**

The respondents in this study had some clear, and at times definite, views on their schools, which included everything from the physical and aesthetic aspects of the school premises and resources, to teachers and teaching, curriculum and relationships within the school. Given that school is, in the main, seen as an extension of the social and cultural milieu which young people inhabit, it is understandable that they expected similar kinds of attributes from their school as those they looked for and enjoyed in their community. These included a school environment that was physically attractive,

spacious, and carried feelings of safety and belonging. A school that was 'friendly' was seen as a good school, compared to a school that was 'unfriendly', which was viewed unfavourably. The physical, social and emotional needs that young people depend upon in their families and communities were, in much the same way, expected from their schools. When students found that these needs were being met by their school, then school became a more sought after experience. The reverse was also true.

## **Teaching and curriculum**

In much the same way that these young people placed value on the kinds of close knit and supportive relationships they often enjoyed in their communities, they also highly valued teachers who treated them well, looked after their social and emotional needs together with their educational needs, and related to them in ways that they felt respected as people. This included their need to have efforts affirmed, mistakes sensitively corrected, and to be related to in ways that did not harm their developing sense of self.

In addition, it is clear that the study's participants had diverse interests, abilities and aspirations. These were reflected, for example, in the vast range of non-school activities they engaged in, but also in the range of students' likes and dislikes about the curriculum and perceptions of what they might do in their lives. By way of comparison, it is clear that what these young people needed from their school in this respect was enough flexibility and choice to cater for this diversity, not only in terms of curriculum, but in the methods of teaching, and the scope of future potentials made available for them. In practice, this means that young people seek an approach that can manage the fact that people learn at different rates, in different ways, and with differing views about the relevance or irrelevance of the subjects they are studying.

## **Life after school**

Schools have a future orientation in that they are organised to prepare and develop the student for a life after school. While students can see the value of a number of aspects of school in terms of preparing them for life, most notably certain subjects that have a practical focus or are explicit pathways into future post-secondary study, in many cases the link was not clear. These deficits were primarily related to areas of curriculum in which the immediate and future relevance often completely eluded the student.

The findings also indicate that processes adopted and information made available to students about career, post-school education, and other transition pathways seemed to be patchy. Some students seemed fairly clear about the variety of post-school options available to them, and were in a position to make informed choices, whilst others were not.

The study found that schools could do more to prepare students in ways that improve what they see as important life skills, as opposed to vocational skills. These include the skills needed to manage relationships (either intimate or conflictual), to manage and

understand social differences, to be more 'street aware' about things such as how to cope with violence, to be more informed about drugs and alcohol and even such things as learning how to drive a car or vote in an election. Many young people thought that their school was so overprotective and limiting of their choices that it actually weakened their sense of self-efficacy. To put it another way, an overly protective school environment robbed them of opportunities to learn to figure things out for themselves, or to learn from their mistakes. For example, the results suggest that young people already have access to drugs and alcohol, but that they seem to reserve the right to exercise their choice as to whether or not to use or consume these. This suggests that what young people need are the skills to assess their choices and manage them accordingly.

### **Respect for diversity and interpersonal skills**

It is interesting to note that generally young people thought of themselves, their school and their community as more or less tolerant and inclusive, and yet a closer look at the data reveals that there are some important limitations and exceptions to this. First, there is a regional aspect to drawing boundaries between one's sense of community and what stands outside of it. Often, young people used Perth or other towns as points of comparison when discussing negative things. For example, drug problems tended to happen in other towns/schools, and Perth was often described as dangerous and unfriendly. This extended to the point where some young people were wary of people who were 'not from around here'. The limitations to tolerance can be seen in the way that some 'in' and 'out' groups form in schools - for example, the way that 'Emos' were typically cast in a negative light. Schools are fertile spaces where young people work on forming their identities, and grapple with issues of difference - sexuality, ethnicity, and so on. While schools are strong centres for forging and maintaining friendships, they are also potential catalysts for divisions, bullying and exclusion.

The evidence suggests a need for education and skills training in things such as conflict resolution, group dynamics and intimate relationships. These could be useful in regards to the present discussion, but could also meet the needs outlined above in regards to life after school.

### **Governance**

The interviews with young people also showed some concern around how school rules are formulated, who devises them, and the consistency (or lack thereof) with which rules are applied. The evidence suggests firstly that students wanted to be consulted and included in some of the key decisions about how the school was run. Secondly, rather than having none or slack rules, young people expected that schools would have rules that were firm, fair, and consistently applied, especially with regard to instances where disruptions occurred or inappropriate behaviour was allowed to reign. At the same time, students also said that they wanted some flexibility in the rules that allowed them to extend their boundaries and be treated with more responsibility. In short, young people need to be involved in decision making and want rules that are firm, fair and equally applied, while not being overly regulated, monitored and controlled.



## **A final note on curriculum and teaching**

This research has highlighted some identified needs of young people in the South West. Many of the surrounding issues relate to the aspirations of young people, interpersonal relationships and the ways that schools can assist these by more adequately preparing students for the future. The findings from this research can be used by teachers to address these needs in relation to existing curriculum documentation, but also note where the curriculum documents are found wanting. That is to say, in some cases teachers will need to be creative in terms of how the needs of young people are adequately incorporated into teaching practice. It should be clear then that the findings from this research are not an exhaustive or final set of conclusions on the needs of young people. Schools and teachers in particular, will need to examine their own students' needs and work in innovative ways to ensure that these needs are met. In this way, schools will be better placed to help their students prepare for life outside and after school, by being aware of and responsive to both the positive attributes of the lives of young people in the South West as well as their specific educational, social and developmental needs.

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## Appendix A Focus Group Interview Schedule

### **Preliminary comments**

Your answers are confidential – we will not use your name in our reports and we won't tell the teachers the details of what you said. From the information you give us we will be writing a report talking about the needs of young people in the South West and also describing how teachers might better prepare students for life – now and once they finish school. Other people do this type of research, but they don't often sit and ask students – so this is your opportunity to tell us all the things you think people who have the power to change things should know.

### **Guiding questions**

- Firstly, can you please tell us a bit about who you are (first name, how old are you, where **do you live**, what are your interests, what do you study)
- What's this school/university/TAFE like? (or what do you like/dislike about your school?)
- What things do you like doing at school?
- What are the things you like doing outside of school?
- What are some good things about living in the South West (town name)?
- Any not-so-good things – that you don't like?
- How well do you think school prepares you for life (after school)?
- As young people living in the South West of WA, what do you think the problems/issues are for your age group?
- Do you think there are different opportunities and issues for rural and city people your age?
- Are there things young people in the South West need now and to prepare them for the future? (Not just material things, but also things that you might need to learn, or services you think would be helpful).
- How different do you think these needs are from what people in the city might need?
- What things should schools (teachers) do to help address these different needs?
- Considering what we have been discussing today, what is (eg) one thing you could advise your school in preparing you for life outside of school?
- *Tell us about these subjects (keeping in mind that we want to know about what you like and don't like and what can be done to help you prepare for life outside of school):*

- *English (what do you do – is it just reading and writing OR do you do some speaking and listening stuff?)*
- *Maths*
- *S & E*
- *Science*
- *T & E subjects*
- *Art*
- *Phys Ed*
- *Health*

**Additional notes/ideas**

Remember these are a guide – your participants' responses might lead you to ask other questions to confirm or clarify what they have said – or you might pursue a particular direction depending on participant responses.