

## **ADOLESCENTS CRAFTING IDENTITIES AFTER A PERIOD OF TIME OUTSIDE EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT.**

In 2011 I was working on a national research project exploring education employment linkages for young New Zealanders ([www.eel.org.nz](http://www.eel.org.nz)). As part of that project, I worked with Sarah McKay (another Collaborative researcher) to talk with fifty-one young Christchurch people who had left school with low or no qualifications.

Most of those young people had had a period of time when they were (in the official jargon) 'NEET', that is, not in education, employment or training. At the time of the interviews, however, they were all in a learning environment, either a teen parent unit or an alternative education organisation.

The report that emerged from those interviews<sup>1</sup> explores the ways in which those young people were actively crafting their identities as adolescents – working out who they were and who they wanted to be.

What was especially interesting was that many of them told us that they had wholeheartedly rejected their NEET identities. We could see that, in their new learning environments, they were working to see themselves as learners. Their stories were enlightening about what helped them in that process.

From an analytical point of view, there were three key issues that came clearly through these stories.

1. *Recognition and relationships: being seen.* There is a lot of research evidence on the importance of relationships of recognition between young people and their teachers. New Zealand researchers have been in the forefront of this through the work of people such as Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman in the Te Kotahitanga project.

Simply put, many of the young people we interviewed felt invisible in the classroom. As one said, 'It was like you weren't even there half the time'. Some acted up because of this and then became physically invisible through being sent out of class, and ultimately (for some) through becoming truant from school. In their alternative learning environment, they felt seen and, importantly, felt safe to be seen: 'You can talk to [the tutors] about anything. You don't have to hide nothing from them.'

2. *Authority structures and learning.* Schools tend to use systems of reward and punishment to communicate what an ideal student identity should be. Students who don't identify with this ideal may struggle to fit in, and are the ones most likely to take on the identity of 'school resister'. In the UK the Rathbone/Nuffield Review found active resistance to the authority structures of school to be common among young people alienated from school.

In the Christchurch example, the young people spoke about this. Sometimes the issues around authority seemed minor – wearing the school uniform correctly, or being allowed to use a phone. But issues of trust and respect lay not far behind:

‘I didn’t like school – didn’t like being told what to do, like schoolwork, so I’d get up and leave or make a big drama and take off. Here [in an AE unit], they do tell you what to do, but they give you time to do it.’

These young people spoke about the expectations that tutors had of them in relation to appropriate behaviour and commitment to learning. Tutors would push them to achieve. One young woman said, ‘You just need that positive push’ and others agreed, with the proviso that the ‘push’ be positive not punitive.

3. *Maintaining a learning identity.* These young people were (re)discovering their capacity to learn, and many were enthusiastic about this and highly motivated to pursue their learning into employment. Comments such as ‘everyone needs an education so they can get qualifications for a job’ and ‘in the end you can’t get a good job without education’ were commonly voiced.

They were making a reasonable assumption that they were gaining an education so that they could then gain suitable employment. This speaks to a promise implicit, and often explicit, in what young New Zealanders hear all the time, from the media, teachers, parents and others – get an education and employment will follow. But the labour market doesn’t necessarily make this possible.

Despite many young people having a period of time outside education, training and employment, this research showed that once they are supported into environments in which they are enabled to develop their learning capacities – to see themselves as successful learners - young people will often embrace that opportunity. But this cannot be the end of the story. What they then need is access to genuine employment opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> Higgins, J. *Towards a Learning Identity: Early School Leavers Becoming Learners.* EEL Research Report No. 09. September 2012.

A shortened version of this report appears in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 2013, Vol. 18:1-2, pp175-193.