

How Young People Think About Self, Work and Futures



Picture: Rhonda Milner

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The *12 to 18 Educational Research Project*, commenced in 1993, is a longitudinal study that is following a number of young people at four different Victorian schools through each year of their secondary schooling. Twice each year, interviews are conducted with 24 students (six students at each of the schools), either alone or with their friends; the interviews are video- and audiotaped. The aim of the study is to follow qualitatively the thinking of these young people, and their pathways as they go through schooling and then enter life beyond this.

In this article, we discuss some findings from this work in progress, looking in particular at how young people in the early and middle years of secondary schooling are thinking about self, work and futures, and we consider in what ways gender is an issue in their approach.

12-18 Project

'20 or 30 years ago . . . there wasn't, like, equal opportunities . . . boys pretty much got everything, and the girls just had to do their best.'

The last part of the twentieth century has been an era of great change: change in the economy and in the nature and structure of jobs; change in social expectations and in family formations; and changes in education – in what schools teach and in the patterns of retention and qualifications. There have also been cultural changes wrought by the influence of television and popular media, and by the wider availability of consumer goods. We can no longer assume that how past generations of students thought about jobs and the future holds true for how young people think today. Nor can we assume that earlier stereotypes of girls or of the

kinds of jobs they prefer have remained constant. Similarly, as is evident in the current press debate about men and boys, how masculinity affects boys' thinking and schooling outcomes is now posed as a question to be investigated rather than presumed to be a taken-for-granted process.

The 1990s in particular has been a period of significant change in terms of girls' and boys' participation in education. Students in the early years of secondary school basically follow a common (that is, non-sex-typed) course, and much is now being made about girls' success at school. Compared with 20 years ago: girls have markedly increased retention and success rates in schooling; girls have improved their participation in mathematics; the number of women enrolled in medicine and law is now on par with the number of men; women are the majority of undergraduates; and in certain fields male unemployment is growing faster than female unemployment.

However, against these advances for women, girls' retention and success in schools and in undergraduate studies has not been matched by a commensurate improvement in women's average income relative to men's, or by their level of seniority and patterns of promotion in the workplace, or by a broadening in the range of occupations pursued by women. Indeed, some of the changes in favour of girls are more an artefact of changed processes than changed outcomes – for example, nursing and teacher training (fields where women continue to predominate) are now fully counted in undergraduate figures, and school retention is now more a norm than an indication of unusual success (Yates and Leder 1996; OSW and ABS 1996; Teese et al. 1995).

Thus one of the aims of the *12 to 18 Project* was to research what it means to young people to be girls and boys in today's Australia. Has the considerable stress on

'equal opportunity' in education policy removed gender as a differentiating feature? How do young people now interpret what jobs are available and what are appropriate pathways into these jobs? How do they see themselves and their own futures?

A second aim of the Project was to provide *qualitative* evidence in relation to these questions. A number of government and semi-government bodies gather statistical evidence about different groups of young people and their aspirations and outcomes, but these do not necessarily allow us to understand the processes at work – to understand why outcomes take on the patterns they do.

For example, in an earlier project designed to provide an overview and review of databases (Yates and Leder 1996), a range of contributors pointed out how the categories deployed in these databases might distort what policy makers inferred. Categories such as 'ethnicity' and 'disability' can include such widely varying types of actual experiences, that the figure relating to the total group is fairly meaningless. As Hartley (in Yates and Leder 1996:192) argued from her research for the Australian Institute of Family Studies, merely to count how many young women and young men live at home or live independently hides the problem that 'living at home' can mean very different things for young women and young men, and that 'living independently' also covers a whole spectrum of different family supports: 'while the objective circumstances of a young woman and a young man may be the same or similar in terms of student/work status, income and age, their rights and responsibilities, and opportunities for independent decision-making may be very different.'

In the *12 to 18 Project*, rather than using surveys, and taking answers to questions at face value, we set out to talk to young people over an extended time (around 45 minutes, twice a year, over seven or eight years) to try to interpret why they were saying particular things, and how comments they made on different parts of their lives related to each other.

The kinds of answers received from young people are significantly different in kind from those that could be gained from survey and questionnaire-based studies of young people's attitudes to futures and careers. We have conducted all the interviews ourselves and witnessed the physical expression of energy in students' 'body language', the excited exchanges with friends in the small interview groups, and the optimistic tone of voice and manner of speaking. The decision to videotape all interviews was taken so that such embodied and immediate responses to questions could be integrated in the overall interpretation of observations and findings.

It terms of the Project's qualitative methodology, we select and interpret excerpts from interviews against broad patterns in the interviews (other students' comments, and comments from the same student over time), against existing theories and research, and against a reflexive analysis of the research context. We look, for example, at the effect of how the interview itself is constructed, whether the students are with friends or on their own, and how our presence as adult women from the university affects how adolescent girls and boys at ages 12, 13 and 14 answer our questions. (For more discussion of the methodology of the Project, see Yates and McLeod 1996; McLeod and Yates 1997).

In other words, methodologically, the approach here is more similar to the work of a historian or anthropologist than the work of a surveyor or experimental scientist. To interpret meaning, there is no set formula or test (Bodgan and Biklen 1992; Fine 1992; Lather 1991; Yates 1997). But this does not mean that the narrative developed is arbitrary, or that evidence is not important.

The examples discussed in this article and the interpretations we make of them have been made on the basis of a careful study of a range of evidence. We systematically review themes across our whole study, but also systematically consider each student as a 'whole' over time; we relate evidence to questions and findings in other research, and so on.

Students were first interviewed at the end of Grade 6 and had just had their first visit to secondary school; they are now entering Year 11, and the intention is to follow them to the first year post-school. It is already clear that not all students will complete the standard VCE and that some will leave school before the completion of Year 12, but we will follow up these students along with the initial cohort. Except in a few cases, we do not know what each student will enter as their job or their post-school course, and in many cases they too are uncertain about this.

In this article we consider some initial indications of what 'gender' looks like and how it is being worked out by young people in school. The examples presented here offer hints about young people's orientation to themselves and to their futures, and these orientations will, in turn, shed light on the formation of their future work patterns.

Girls

'When I'm 25, I want to get a red Porsche, drive with my boyfriend to a nightclub, and eat custard tarts.'

In the first rounds of interviews, we confronted significant but not unexpected differences between girls from privileged backgrounds attending an elite private school and girls in a poor rural area. However, a close reading of these responses also reveals more subtle differences, as well as some similarities that could easily be overshadowed by the immediately striking differences.

In the first interviews, students were asked: 'What do you think you will be doing when you are 25?' And then: 'What would you like to be doing then?'

A girl attending the private school in the study talked at length about how she would like to be a part-time bar-rister and a part-time journalist, and travel the world, and take a lot of photographs. And then she looked at us and paused, possibly assessing her audience and what she thought we would value, and began to talk about how she would also really love to go to Somalia and spend time helping the people there.

At a poor, rural school in the study, three Grade 6 girls were more tentative in imagining their futures.

Q: 'What do you think your life will be like when you leave school? Do you think about that much?'

(Silence – all three girls shake their heads.)

Q: 'What would you like to be doing, Tania?' [*names are changed*]

Tania: 'Maybe babysitting. And play for Australia in net-ball.'

Debbie: 'Babysitting.'

Alison: 'Same.'

Q: 'What about when you're 25. Any ideas?'

Tania: (shakes her head)

Debbie: (taking on a serious expression) 'Help look after Brendan when he has asthma.'

Q: 'What about if you could have a wish and do anything you really liked. What would you like to do when you're 25?'

Debbie: 'Live with my sister – the oldest one, in [nearest larger town].'

Alison: (who has virtually said nothing to this point in the interview) 'Get a job.'

At one level we can note the big difference in the actual jobs and futures talked about by these girls from different schools – a barrister and world-traveller versus a babysitter or 'get a job'; clearly the girls' families as well as the school milieu have brought them in contact with different possibilities.

At another equally significant level, there is the question of what is happening in the interview itself. The girls in the two locations deal quite differently with the experience of being interviewed by outsiders. In the first case, the length and the fluidity of the response, as well as the pause and redirection during the interview (again considered against other interviews with students from like and very different backgrounds) shows a self-awareness and ease about the presentation of self to strangers. This was in marked contrast with the monosyllabic responses, the downcast eyes and nervousness of the girls in the second interview. Later, both groups may encounter attempts by schools to prepare them for interviews, to teach 'interview technique', but the reflexiveness and the sense of what is appropriate in different settings is being honed more finely from an earlier age by girls in middle-class families.

However, alongside the disparities in the futures envisaged by the two groups of girls, we can also note some similarities in theme or form. Drawing on Gilligan's work (1990), we note that girls from both groups express aspirations both for 'autonomy' and 'connectedness'; both see a future built around and maintaining certain relationships, but both aspire not to be consumed by this (even if the escape is no more than leaving home). The tension between these two orientations was also apparent in interviews with other individual girls over time (Grade 6 – Year 10) and surfaced across a range of different types of discussions with them. In junior and middle school, girls might talk about pursuing different careers and futures at different stages of their growing up – some as fantasy, others as more realistic possibilities – but the conjunction of similar concerns and dilemmas is present throughout.

To take some examples. For Marion, there is a persistent anxiety about how to fulfil her strong desire 'to know that she is helping others' (Year 8). Until Year 10, Marion repeatedly told us that she wanted to be a special education teacher and work with disabled children. At the end of Year 10, however, she was no longer sure that teaching is the path she wants to follow as she doesn't want to become an 'ordinary teacher' as part of her special education training. Marion is torn between her ambitions for 'something else', a career which satisfies her growing sense of personal confidence and capability, and her sense of obligation and concern for others.

In Years 7 and 8, many of the students expressed their dislike of being asked what job they were going to do by teachers or parents; they didn't really know, and they hated being pinned down about it:

Jane: 'People always ask you what you want to be when you grow up and I just have no idea, so I've kind of thought about it – 'cos they kind of put you on the spot and they can make you feel like you have to know what you're doing, so you kind of have to think about it.' (Year 7)

But they also were happy to acknowledge that they did think or 'daydream' a lot about the future in less instrumental and job-focused ways.

Amanda: 'Sometimes it's nice to just imagine if you've got your own place. It's just . . . sometimes you just want to get away from your family – like, you just hate your family. Like you just, you just get sick of everything and you just want to be by yourself, like, oh, not by yourself, but just have your own house, and then it's yours and you can do whatever you want. You can. No one's telling you what to do and you just – yeah, you can do whatever you want.' (Year 7)

Eliza: 'Um, well, I think when I'm about 25 I'd like to be, um, out of the house with my family and just so that I can organise everything better, because when your family's around sometimes they're doing different things and it can all get complicated. And I'd like to, um, go to uni, and maybe train as a vet. And I think that's about all – I can't really think of anything else.' (Year 7)

Irma: 'I'd like to have two big St. Bernard dogs. That's what I'd like to have. And I'd like to have a Harley and a convertible, and then drive along with my two St. Bernard dogs in the back.' (Year 7)

Leanne: 'When I'm 25, I want to get a red Porsche, drive with my boyfriend to a nightclub, and eat custard tarts.' (Year 7)

Joanne: 'When I'm 25 I want to be travelling around the world.' (Year 7)

Leanne: 'One thing I would love to do would be, um, it sounds a bit queer, but I'd love to go into space. I'd love to be . . . one day. I'd love to work with animals and stuff. So.'

Julie: 'Leanne and I were talking last night, like what we wanted to do. Like I didn't want to do bungy jumping, and Leanne did – and abseiling and things. (Julie, Year 7)

Leanne: 'I'd like to try skydiving. I'd love to be able to fly some day.'

These comments from girls in the first years of secondary school express an enormous striving for independence and adventure – and a desire to be free of the close surveillance of their own mothers and fathers. The girls dreamt a lot about travelling and having their own house, and not being told what to do; and over and over again they day-dreamed about having their own car and driving – a vibrant image of independence and freedom. These dreams and fantasies were often clearly as much about their wishes to change their present restrictions as any form of planning for the future, but they were notable for the air of energy and optimism they conveyed.

Such images and impressions of adventure were not at all common in the answers given by boys to the same questions. The boys were much more likely to daydream about their futures in terms of playing top-level sport and being famous, rather than in terms of a yearning for freedom and autonomy. Moreover, in the early secondary years, boys were more likely to become enlivened when talking about activities in the present rather than when imagining their future. While in years 7 and 8 both girls and boys are more concerned with fantasy than with strategic planning about their futures, in both the early and middle school years more boys than girls are saying they don't know or think much about their futures.

Alongside girls' longing for independence and success, we also found an intense concern about relationships and friends. In year 7, for example, when asked what were the best and worst things about school, commonly for girls the best things were 'seeing friends', 'lunchtimes' and 'the cafeteria'. Conversely,

the worst thing that could happen in school was lack of friends or falling out with friends.

Angela: 'Yeah, it totally changes. Like if you don't have friends then you don't really have anything in school.' (Year 7)

Caroline: 'It's all right if you don't have – I mean it's not good, but it's better to have, to have friends. I mean, it's better to have no friends than being teased and having no friends.' (Year 7)

In the study there are examples of both girls and boys who have experienced having no friends and being teased or bullied. In all cases it makes them unhappy, but the boys tend to respond by announcing that they will just ignore them, concentrate on their work, eventually succeed, and will 'show them' that their scorn didn't matter: problems with friends should not intrude on work. Indeed, unhappiness and loneliness can be a strong incentive to work harder and to be successful in school and in post-school work.

Rodney: 'Oh, people tease me, always pickin' on me and that, but you just ignore them . . . Just think "you're an idiot" and walk off . . . I just ignore them, and think about the kind of job they're going to have, if they have any job when they get older. Because if they don't do the work, well they're gonna fail aren't they, and drop out of school.' (1995, Year 8)

In some respects, the experience of being bullied or having trouble with friends serves to sharpen boys' sense of their own identity, setting them apart from others, and forcing them to focus more on a life and a future away from school. In Year 7, one of the boys, who was from an ethnic-minority background, was finding it hard to make friends and to work out the patterns of social relations at the school. But he determined not to let his loneliness and uncertainty distract him from his school work. On the contrary, he reported spending his lunchtimes sitting by himself under a tree memorising the distance between the planets as he believed that this would help him to fulfil his long-term aim to study science at university.

For girls, in contrast, the unhappiness caused by friendship troubles can be so intense, and the relationship so central, that they find it difficult to work in class or think beyond the immediate dilemma.

In Year 9, we asked the young people to tell us about a time when they had felt very happy or very unhappy. For both girls and boys, the happy time was often related to public success (sport, dance, school) and acknowledged as such. But for girls the unhappy memory was almost always about private relationship – something hurtful said by a friend, an incident with their mother and father, and so on. In other words, this suggests an era in which girls are striving to achieve and are aware that success is socially valued, but at the same time their sensitivity to and focus on relationships, caring and intimacies creates tensions for them and can even serve to undermine their ambition and the pleasures derived from being successful.

Nearly ten years ago, Gilligan et al. (1990:9–10) wrote about the dilemmas faced by adolescent girls in America: 'Adolescence poses problems of connection for girls coming of age in Western culture, and girls are tempted or encouraged to solve these problems by excluding themselves or excluding others – that is, by being a good woman or by being selfish . . . For girls to remain responsible to themselves they must resist the conventions of feminine goodness; to remain responsible to others, they must resist the values placed on self-sufficiency and independence in North American culture.'

Although there is debate about the extent to which Gilligan's arguments apply to women of different backgrounds (Davis 1994), the themes she identifies do seem to be ones that can be seen in many of the girls in the *12 to 18 Project*, not just in terms of how they think about themselves now or the dreams they have about their future (including their future jobs), but also in the processes of working towards those futures.

For example, a girl in Year 9 said she was really worried about her maths teacher and that she wasn't going so well at maths, and was falling behind. She had had the same teacher for three years (this was at an elite private school) and felt she was not learning much from him – he did not explain things in a way she could understand. But when we asked her if she or her parents had considered seeing whether she could be in another class, she said of the teacher, 'he's the sort of



Picture: Rhonda Milner

They dreamt a lot about travelling and having their own house, and not being told what to do.

person that would be upset if he thought you didn't understand'. In other words, she was taking responsibility for not hurting his feelings, even if it undermined her own chances of doing well.

We also came across a number of examples of girls trying very hard to please their fathers and being hurt in the process. In one case, a girl gave as her unhappiest memory a time when her father (a doctor) had tried to explain a maths problem to her. She had not understood but, in order not to hurt his feelings, pretended she had, and went away and cried and cried. Another girl loved horse riding and had had quite a lot of success in this. She had also made the effort to get up early and go running with her father and do other things that he liked. But her father made no similar effort to attend her horse riding events or any of the other things in which she was involved.

Thus we see examples of adolescent girls working out some apparently persistent dilemmas in being a young woman – negotiating tensions between desires for personal success and a sense of obligation to and responsibility for others. However, it would be a mistake to surmise from this that equal opportunity and gender equity reforms in schools have somehow failed girls, have not given them enough self-confidence, or encouraged them enough to pursue their own ambitions. Indeed, in some respects, it is precisely the possibilities for personal success and public achievement opened up and emphasised by feminist reform that has heightened these tensions between 'connection' and 'autonomy' for young girls today.

Boys

'But most males are just normal.'

In the last five years, the question of boys' conduct and performance at school has received considerable attention in both the popular press and academic forums (Mac An Ghail 1994), and is now regarded by many as an urgent priority for educators and policy makers (Morton 1997; Ludowyke 1997).

In addition to demands for gender equity policies to address the specific needs of boys, there have been calls for schools to address the construction of masculinity, and to examine how schools themselves participate in that construction. In much of this work, school-age boys are depicted as enacting and reproducing fairly conventional styles of masculinity. Boys, we are told, are unfamiliar with expressing their feel-

Q: 'Do you think it is something schools should do something about?'

Mark: 'Um, well, there's not a real lot you can do about it, cause if you send them out then they are only going to get further behind. If they stuff around and you just send them out, they are only going to get further behind, and teachers don't really have a say about what you do in your spare time, whether you do your homework or not, so . . .'

Q: 'What's your opinion on this issue?'

Sean: 'Um. I don't really . . . I think that boys and girls have got the same chances to do well in VCE, but as Mark said, they – boys – tend to stuff around a bit more. But you can't stop that. Boys will be boys. So there's not a lot you can really do, it's their choice.' (1997, Year 10)



Picture: Karen Malone

Boys played around a lot in class, but it was their choice, and it was 'just the way they were'.

ings and making friends, they too readily resort to aggressive and physically violent behaviour, they perform less well than girls in English and the other allegedly feminised humanities subjects, and so on. The validity and implications of these kind of arguments have been examined by others (Kenway 1997; Yates 1997). What is of interest to us here is the attitudes to masculinity held by both girls and boys, the forms of masculinity being worked out by boys today, and the influence this has on their self-perceptions and thinking about the future.

One of the striking themes we see emerging is the perception – held by girls and boys across all four very different schools – of certain conventional forms of masculinity as being obdurate, as unquestioningly normal and not open to change. In response to questions about whether they thought that girls were doing better at school than boys, or if boys needed special programs, girls and boys unanimously answered that girls did work harder than boys, that boys played around a lot in class, but there was really nothing much to do to help boys as it was their choice to be like that and it was 'just the way they were'.

Mark: 'Well, most of the boys sort of piss – stuff around. Yeah, they stuff around and they don't do a real lot in class and that. That is . . .'

Josh: 'Basically, they have more fun, or try to, and, you know, mess around and play up to see what they can get away with. Stuff like that. The girls more or less just get straight down to work and stuff like that and work hard. Not to say that boys don't work hard.'

One group of girls astutely observed that the mucking-around behaviour of boys did not necessarily impede later academic success.

Melissa: 'Yeah, boys seem to like – they take out all the prizes in Year 12 and stuff, but they don't worry about it from Years 7–11 or whatever, because it doesn't seem important to them until they get to Year 12. Because they then – then most of the boys got all the maths and science prize and stuff. And like, oh the Dux wasn't a boy, but usually it had been.' (1997, Year 10)

This pattern of events did not, however, appear unusual or remarkable to the girls. Rather, it was reported in a matter-of-fact manner, and as evidence of boys making fairly sensible choices in terms of managing their schooling and future outcomes. That boys and girls continue to construct conventional masculine behaviour as natural, sensible and intractable was also evident in discussions about body image and dieting. Both girls and boys interpreted girls' concerns with body image and being slim to be 'stupid', pathetic signs of their vanity. In contrast, boys generally talked about body image as something they did not really care about, and if they did it was because of a reasonable concern with weight and fitness.

Q: 'Is body image important for to you, Robert?'

Robert: 'No, if they say something to you, you just don't listen, just ignore them.'

Q: 'Is it different for girls?'

Robert: 'Yeah, they have to, like, if they're fat or something they have to go on a diet, whereas males wouldn't really care. They don't really care how they look. Like, if they were really fat or something, they'd have to try and go on a diet or something, or exercise. But most males are just normal.' (1995, Year 8)

We are finding some evidence, then, of girls and boys continuing to accept the authority and naturalness of conventional expressions of masculinity. At the same time, however, we are also finding that some of the responses from boys, especially in the junior years of secondary school, run counter to the usual representations of masculinity. As noted above, while clearly some stereotypical conduct persists, we have also been struck by the willingness of boys, especially in the junior years of secondary school, to speak freely and tenderly of the importance of friendship and to describe themselves and each other in terms of their loyalty and support as a friend.

Q: 'What else would you add to describe Terry?'

Anthony: 'Well, he likes lots of sport. He's in the sport things we have at this school – athletics, he's in those. And he's a good friend.'

Brian: 'Like when I cracked my head open and had to have stitches, he sat at the sick bay until me mum came to get me, and when I'm up in the sick bay he sits there . . . He's thoughtful.'

Q: 'And how would you describe yourself, Brian?'

Brian: 'Well, I like most of the sports at this school. I want to play cricket when I'm older. I'd like to be like Dean Jones, 'cos I reckon he's real good. And – um – I like cars and motorbikes, because if you've got a motorbike you can ride it around the paddock. I like most of the teachers at this school.'

Q: 'Would you add anything to that?'

Terry: 'Well, he's friendly too. Like if you get in a fight or something and you're crying, he's cheerful. He cheers you up a lot.'

Q: 'And Anthony, how would you describe yourself?'

Anthony: 'I like music, I play a few instruments . . . I've got a fair few friends. I like most of the teachers at this school, *most* of them [laughs]. I do fairly well in class. I help other people do things that they're not sure of.' (1993, End of Grade 6)

For this group of boys, there is no tension in talking about traditional kinds of boys' activities – sport, fighting, cars and motorbikes – at the same time as acknowledging the value of emotional support from each other. After more than two decades of feminist and gender equity work in schools, we have become accustomed to looking for and noting changes in girls' attitudes and performance. We need now also to attend more closely to the effects these interventions might have had on boys' values and attitudes, and to identify any shifts, however subtle, in boy's gender identity. Even the pro-boys' and men's movement literature continues to characterise boys in fairly crude stereotypes – boys are emotionally illiterate, have difficulty sustaining friendship, are focused on the public world of work, sport and achievement and so on. Against this fairly bleak and homogenised picture of masculinity, we have been finding greater variation in boys' responses, and glimpses of the stereotypes undergoing change.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on some examples of gendered patterns in secondary students' attitudes to self, school, work and futures. In a period of equal opportunity and gender equity reforms and significant changes in education, we are seeing differences in the ways in which girls and boys act and think today.

Girls have a heightened sense of ambition, energy and optimism relative to the public world, and while this is important it can also generate tensions because girls are juggling these desires with their emotional investment in personal intimacies and relations of caring and concern for others.

There is increasing public concern about boys' conduct and performance at school, and statistically boys are (relatively) no longer doing so well at school. We have found that the 'mucking around' of boys is accepted by both girls and boys as a normal part of school life, and that in the junior and middle years there is little interest in doing things very differently. But, as

boys enter the senior years of schooling, there are some changes occurring in their thinking about school work, and an awareness that it is now time to develop a more serious and strategic attitude to school work. At the same time, we have some hints that as girls get older, they are starting to become less confidently ambitious about their future plans.

As we complete the final and crucial stages of this longitudinal study, we will be able to see whether the gender differences apparent in junior and middle school persist into the senior years, directly influencing post-school choices, or whether other kinds of differences and patterns emerge, shaping the ways in which girls and boys not only imagine but pursue their futures.

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