Early School Leaving
'Whatever happened to that Kid?'\(^1\)

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In recent times a great deal has been written about youth homelessness, school retention rates, broadening school curriculum options, the need for more skilled workers, youth training, the coordination of youth services, and of course, youth offending.

In many of these discussions the term 'Early School Leaver' plays a major role. The term is used as though we already have a shared understanding of its meaning. It is assumed that all early school leaving is related to factors such as poverty, failure at school, lack of parental education or concern, and negative peer influences. At the same time, the legacy of the 'self-made man' remains and there are still those who consider all early school leavers to be potential 'Alan Bonds'.

Despite some confusion and lack of information, early school leaving is an issue of concern. Most people would agree that young people without access to schooling do not have the same life opportunities as students who can be maintained within the educational system. Lack of education is seen to affect employment options, and access to services such as health, accommodation and further training. This lack of access is often further accentuated by the limited availability of youth services in certain geographical areas.

It is against this background that Grassmere decided to support research into early school leaving in the local area. This paper, based on the booklet from this research has three main components: school based research, research results and case studies.

The School Based Research

Encouraging students to research issues of interest and concern to them is no longer new. The benefits of allowing students to begin to make meaningful connections between ideas and information are becoming self-evident. However, the process is not spontaneous.

How students went about collecting data for this project was described by the classroom teacher:

\(^1\) Copies of the booklet, Whatever happened to that Kid? are available from: Grassmere Youth Services, PO Box 125, DOVETON VIC 3177.
Contacting the early school leavers and their parents was the most difficult part of the project.

We decided to conduct the interviews by telephone because this was the easiest and safest way we could think of. Everyone had a go at writing a telephone introduction. I chose K’s because it was short, to the point and innocent (some of the introductions made it sound like we were from ASIO). K seemed pleased about this. The other girls seemed surprised. The boys just kept making chauvinistic comments. K was a girl in the class the boys used to build up their egos.

With the questionnaires ready, the names and phone numbers listed and the telephone introduction written, it was time to start ringing.

The kids looked nervous. They wouldn’t look me in the eye. I gave a pep talk on overcoming fear, how kids had to take risks to succeed, how this project was important, how we promised ESLAG … What about the money? Come on, ten bucks for the first interview!

But suddenly they all had jobs, calisthenics, football training, ballroom dancing lessons, their parents didn’t like them using the telephone. The bell went. I was forcing questionnaires into their pockets as they backed through the door.

That night K contacted an early school leaver’s parents and did an interview. K was rapt. The parent had been very friendly. His son (the early school leaver) was going to ring K the next night. K was the only kid who had tried. The boys were quiet. No nasty comments today. K had guts.

The students took part in all aspects of the research including helping design the questionnaires, identifying respondents, conducting the interviews, coding the results into the computer at La Trobe University and even writing their own conclusions. They were paid for their work. As an end in itself this process was worthwhile. At the same time it must be said that these students needed guidance, support and encouragement to stick with the project and although they collected extensive information, their ability to draw logical conclusions was a little disappointing. It is an area that obviously needs work.

**Research results—introduction**

The results were surprising but before considering the findings, it is important to establish the methodological context. To quote from the booklet:

The results obtained from this study could not form the basis of generalisations about all early school leavers. The early school leavers and parents who provided the data for this research represented a biased sample in that:

a) all the students attended the same school

b) all lived within the same geographical area

c) all the students and parents questioned had not changed their place of residence since the students left school (up to 5 years earlier)

d) all were contactable by telephone at their home address

e) all agreed to participate and answer questions from students over the phone.
Despite this sample bias, the research may not be as lacking as it first appears. Although the student researchers were inexperienced, they undertook the project without strongly preconceived ideas or vested interests. Their interviews were discussed in detail with the teacher supervising the research to ensure honest procedures were followed.

Findings

Six points should be highlighted from the findings.

- **The large number of early school leavers**
  
  In one school, 80 students had left prior to completing Year 9 in the last 5 years. The student researchers managed to follow up 30 early school leavers and 31 parents of leavers. Although perhaps not statistically significant, the results are interesting in that they represent the collective viewpoints and experiences of 30 students and 31 parents who have had direct involvement in the decisions and consequences of early school leaving.

- **The large percentage (80 per cent) of parents who were better educated than their children**
  
  Given the rise in retention rates over the last 20 years, this is rather exceptional.

- **The number of parents (24 out of 31) who tried, but could not convince their children to stay at school**
  
  Does this mean that at 14.6 years (average age) children make their own decisions? What are the implications for education?

- **The number of early school leavers (approximately two-thirds) who stated they could handle the academic subjects along with their teachers and peers**
  
  If school was generally a positive experience why did these students decide to leave?

- **For approximately 50 per cent of the students, leaving school early could be seen as a 'good decision'**
  
  This reflected in the following results:
  
  12 out of 30 leavers had stable employment (i.e. longer than 12 months)
  
  18 out of 30 leavers did not regret leaving school
  
  18 out of 30 parents felt their children had made the right decision leaving school.

- **The students who had negative experiences or attitudes towards school had more difficulty obtaining or maintaining employment**
  
  This is reflected in the employment patterns of those students who were 'kicked out' or who stated they had negative attitudes to school.
In summary, the most important point to emerge within the sample is that early school leaving is not a product of any one factor—home, school or parental attitudes. Consequently any generalisations about early school leaving must take into account the range of individual cases, from the capable student who accepts a permanent job offer, to the impoverished student 'kicked out' of school and unable to find employment. The results reveal this wide range of student and parental experience.

The Case Studies

The six case studies presented in the booklet are unique. They are about real individuals in real situations and have been compiled by practising teachers, social workers, youth workers and psychologists. Whilst recognising the differences that exist between each case study, as a group they serve to highlight several key issues in relation to early school leaving.

In broad terms the case studies can be divided into two groups; school based and community based.

School based

Each case study describes a student who had difficulty coping with school structures, curriculum and procedures. The behaviour of each of the students created antagonism with peers and some staff. In each case the parents' involvement was arranged by staff.

The staff attempted to implement predominantly individual strategies to change each student's ability to fit in at school. All the teachers achieved some measure of individual change.

Although the outcomes and the follow-up vary slightly in each case, the common focus is clearly upon the difficulty of maintaining some students within the normal school system.

Community based case studies

In each of these case studies, the focus is not integration into school, but integration into the community and in particular, employment.

Each case individual spent time drifting out of school and out of work. The best things in life may be free, but these case studies highlighted the importance of income for young people. The case studies also highlighted the importance of a supportive work environment.

It is clear that the success of each of these case studies is primarily based upon obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment. However, in each there was a significant time gap between leaving school (officially or unofficially) and finding suitable employment. All experienced some sense of alienation from the community during this transitional period. The common focus amongst the workers involved with these youths was to minimise the negative impact of unemployment and achieve integration into the community through stable employment.

Overall, the case studies really serve to identify the mandate that different workers focus upon when dealing with early school leavers. Education ministry staff clearly have no mandate to follow up on, or to provide any ongoing support to students who leave school. This raises many issues in relation to the role of schools and their relationship with other youth service providers.
Conclusion

In some parts of Australia a daring experiment has been conducted over a number of years. It seems that radical non-intervention has been trialled on early school leavers. With high employment the results appear to be about 50:50. Grassmere considers the experiment a failure.