‘I want to be here’
Early school leavers re-engage in study at TAFE

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In this paper, young people enrolled in foundation skills courses compare their experiences at TAFE with their experiences at school. Interviews were conducted with 30 early school leavers who were enrolled in foundation skills courses at two TAFE campuses. The students spoke with passion about their often-negative experiences of school and, in contrast, their positive experiences at TAFE. They highlighted the greater flexibility and freedom, the respectful relationships with teachers and peers, and the opportunities for academic achievement at TAFE. The research demonstrates the important role that foundation courses at TAFE can play in re-engaging young people with education and learning.

There is widespread concern in Australia, and internationally, about student disengagement from secondary school. The longer-term outcomes for young people associated with such disengagement are well documented and include low school achievement, early school leaving, and lack of options for employment or further study (Lamb et al. 2004; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011). These outcomes are a major policy concern for governments and have led to various initiatives to develop school-based practices that engage students, extend school completion rates or ensure that young people who leave school prior to completing Year 12 are “learning or earning” in some capacity (Lamb & Rice 2008; Council of Australian Governments 2008, 2009). The rationale for such policies is that young people with Year 12, or an equivalent qualification, have greater opportunities for employment and/or further education.

The transition to work and further education is often most problematic for early school leavers, who are typically among the most disengaged from secondary school (Lamb et al. 2004). There are a range of interrelated risk factors associated with disengagement from school and early-school leaving. These include individuals’ psychological and educational characteristics (for example, low self-esteem, low levels of literacy and numeracy, and poor
academic achievement), issues related to family circumstances (for example, high family mobility, family poverty) and demographic factors (for example, male gender, rural location, low socio-economic status, Indigenous background) (Lamb et al. 2004; Marks & McMillan 2001). School-related factors that contribute to student disengagement include negative school and discipline culture, poor teacher–student relationships, experience of academic and social problems, lack of curriculum relevance and low expectations of students (Willms 2003; Murray et al. 2004).

Student disengagement in secondary school has resulted in various institutions offering alternative educational options (Crane & Livock 2012; Mills & McGregor 2010). The vocational education and training (VET) sector is one such alternative environment for young people disaffected with the school system. Institutions such as TAFE (Technical and Further Education) can provide “second chance” educational opportunities for those whose “first chance” for education has been unsuccessful (Karmel & Woods 2008; Ross & Gray 2003; Wyn, Stokes & Tyler 2004). The VET sector is seen to have a specific role in the provision of foundation skills for those without a school certificate and/or low levels of literacy and numeracy (Skills Australia 2010).

Concern has been raised in the literature about the appropriateness of the TAFE environment for young early school leavers. Researchers have reported that the adult learning environment of TAFE can be unsuitable for young people (Polesel 2010). Further, it has been argued that adult education providers are not necessarily equipped to deal with the complex academic and pastoral needs of young people “scared by the experience of school” (Polesel, Nizinska & Kurantowicz 2011, p.364). In a review of literature related to educational options for disengaged young people, Wyn, Stokes and Tyler (2004) challenge the assumption that “problem students” can be “shuffled” into institutions such as TAFE. These concerns raise questions about the type of support that needs to be in place within foundation courses for young people who have complex educational needs.

A second area of concern relates to low rates of course completion in the VET sector for early school leavers (Polesel 2010), and low rates of completion for Certificate I and II courses (which include the foundation skills courses in which many early school leavers are enrolled) (Karmel & Woods 2008). While there is much quantitative data related to completion rates in particular, there is little detailed qualitative data that examines students’ views about their courses and the factors that enable and constrain participation (Volkoff 2007).

Indeed, there is relatively little Australian research that documents the attitudes and feelings of early school leavers about their experiences in foundation courses in the VET sector. The voice of early school leavers is important for several reasons. Students are able to offer expertise about educational issues because of their profound, lived knowledge of school and TAFE. Much research points to students’ ability to abstract and generalise from their experiences and arrive at insightful conclusions (Kane & Maw 2005). Finally, the student viewpoint in foundation skills courses is arguably particularly important, given the statistical trends regarding course completion.

Two studies that have investigated the perspectives of early school leavers in TAFE or similar alternative education environments have identified the following factors as important to young people’s participation in foundation courses: the quality of relationships with teachers, the pathways provided by the course, the accessibility of the institution, the support provided by peers, curriculum relevance.
and the degree of flexibility of the course (Wyn, Stokes & Tyler 2004; Livock 2009).

The broad aim of the current research was to explore, from students’ perspectives, the factors that can contribute to young people’s disengagement from school and those that encourage their re-engagement in education through TAFE. More specifically, the study aimed to explore students’ comparisons of their experiences of secondary school and TAFE.

Method

Courses included in the study
This study was conducted across five different foundation skills courses delivered on two TAFE campuses in regional towns. The courses provided foundation skills at the following levels: Prevocational, Certificate I, Certificate II and Certificate III. Foundation skills encompass English and literacy, mathematics and numeracy, as well as employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, planning and organising, and technology (Roberts & Wignall 2010). The courses had been designed for those without a Year 10 Certificate and/or with low levels of literacy and numeracy. Students enrolled in the courses attended classes on three days each week over an 18-week term.

Participants
Participants were volunteers who consented to be part of the study. Thirty students (19 male, 11 female) participated in the interview, representing a participation rate of 70%. The students ranged in age from 16 to 25 years, and all lived in regional towns. The average age was 17 years. None of the students who participated in the research had completed Year 10 at school.

Interview
The data reported in this paper were collected as part of a larger study examining teaching practices and classroom environments that encourage student effort and participation across a range of courses in TAFE settings. Students’ views were elicited using a semi-structured interview. The interview questions pertaining to this study included some general introductory items relating to the nature of work undertaken in the course and features that students liked and disliked about the course. The students were then asked how their experiences of TAFE compared with their experiences of secondary school. The average time taken for each interview was approximately 15 minutes.

Analysis of data
The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The responses to the interview questions were coded iteratively, using an inductive approach (Thomas 2006). In many cases, students spontaneously compared their experiences at school with those at TAFE, as part of their response to the general introductory questions about enjoyment of their course, features they liked and so on. In these cases, the specific question about the comparison between school and TAFE was still asked, modified to become a prompt for further information: “is there anything else you would like to say about the differences between school and TAFE?” All comments in which students compared school and TAFE were included in the analysis.

Findings
In the interviews, students spoke with passion about their often-negative school experience and, in contrast, their positive experiences at TAFE. The analysis of the comparisons identified four main themes: rules versus freedom, teacher support and respect, positive social relationships between students and opportunity for success.
These four themes are considered in turn below.

**Rules versus freedom**

Many of the students described TAFE as an “adult learning environment”. The notion of an “adult learning environment” is one that is promoted by TAFE and is certainly a term used by students. The freedom in the TAFE environment was contrasted with what students saw as the rule-bound and restrictive environment of school:

At school you’ve got all these stupid little rules and you don’t really know what’s going on.

While here you know what’s going on and you know what you’ve got to do, you get it done and then do whatever in your own time. (David)

Students also characterised TAFE as more relaxed than school:

- *School’s more formal, you’ve got to do this at a certain time; at TAFE it’s more relaxed.* (John)
- *Like at school, you can’t do them things [things you enjoy], you’ve got to, they set you your task and you have to do that task.* (Maddy)

Students felt that the flexibility and relaxed nature of TAFE helped them do their work compared to the pressure of school:

- *TAFE is somewhat more flexible than school. There’s not so much pressure and it’s just more easy-going, which makes me feel comfortable and able to do my work without much pressure.* (Owen)

One student made a connection between the less rule-bound nature of the TAFE environment and an improved relationship with teachers:

- *There are a few rules but they’re simple and easy and you don’t have everyone following you, like teachers and everything hassling you about doing something wrong... So the teachers don’t get frustrated.* (Ricky)

**Teacher support and respect**

Respectful relationships with teachers and, in particular, the help provided by teachers, were often mentioned by students. It was clear that students valued the individual attention, support and feedback provided by their TAFE teachers, and that this was a major factor that encouraged their learning. The students specifically noted that the teachers at TAFE were able to provide more help and support than their teachers at school:

- *I’ve got good teachers and, unlike school, it’s okay to raise your hand and say, I need help. Because the teacher finds the time to come round and see you and make sure you’re all right.* (Ryan)
- *A normal teacher, you’re just another student — “Hang on, I’ll get to you in a minute” — but here it’s definitely more one on one. Because you know they care about your individual problems and that. They have a concern that you’re struggling with that particular field of work and they want to help you to understand it.* (Chris)

Other students noted that there were smaller classes and fewer students for teachers to interact with at TAFE compared to school:

- *Well it’s pretty much the same as school except the teachers are better. They help you more because there are not as many students and not a lot of kids are mucking up and stuff.* (Jason)
- *The classes aren’t too big; they’re actually quite reasonably sized so you get the attention that you need, that’s the bottom line.* (Mitchell)

The point raised by this student is an important one. Students in this study were typically undertaking two or three modules at any one
time within their course and so worked with two or three teachers. The class sizes were also small, usually no more than 15 students per class.

The students discussed how TAFE enables a different kind of student–teacher relationship to develop, compared with school:

*I pretty much like the adult learning environment, where I get treated as an equal, not like a sort of a subject. (Alex)*

*During TAFE you're treated as an adult or at your own age and even if you're a bit younger, you're treated as an adult. You've got more ... you're a human being, you're actually a person, you're not just a number in a category on a shelf somewhere. Just all in general, you've got a place where you can be you – learning. And you can have assistance from a teacher that cares. Whereas at school, it's just, you're a number on a shelf, who cares? Whatever. It's just not cool. You're entitled to so much more at TAFE, including your own wellbeing for a start. (Kyle)*

**Positive peer behaviour and interaction**

Positive peer behaviour and interaction were also mentioned by many of the students. Compared with school, students noticed that there was less “mucking up” at TAFE:

*It's just more free-roaming in a way like, school you've got to be there, TAFE is on your own shoulders, whether you come or not. And obviously [at school], you've got to have people there that don't want to be there, so they're going to be causing trouble whereas TAFE, it's going to be a better environment because it's people who want to be here. So the people who want to be here are going not [to] cause trouble. (Leo)*

*At high school, there are more people in the class and most of them muck up and it distracts the teacher from learning, whereas in this class, they're more well-behaved and you get more teacher time. (Lara)*

Students also commented that class members were nicer and more respectful to one another in TAFE classrooms than at school:

*You feel you're treated more respectful and that, so you feel you're going to be respectful to them. (Holly)*

*It's a good environment to work in as well. It's not like the payout at school where they've got the stupid little comments and the kids acting up and stuff like that. (Jess)*

A number of students mentioned that they had been bullied and teased at school by their peers. Students characterised school life as harsh and somewhat brutal. By comparison TAFE was described as a place in which they felt treated with respect:

*[TAFE's] a bit different to school and everyone gets treated properly ... it's not like at school when everyone punches up or anything. (Lucy)*

*In high school I got bullied so that was part of the reason why I came here ... so I could stop being bullied and I found it easier to work when I wasn't under the influence of being bullied. (Chloe)*

Students indicated they had formed friendships at TAFE:

*I find it's easier [at TAFE], there's more room and you have more help than what you do at school. And it's easier to make friends with everybody. (Luke)*

Students liked TAFE because it was a safer environment – they were not humiliated by peers if they made a mistake or if they were having trouble understanding the work:
I prefer to come to TAFE than go to high school because at high school, just say if you’re struggling, you get picked on. And here at TAFE, it’s a lot more mature. (Maddy)

At school, pardon my French, but everyone bitches or they just, like they think they’re everything and here at TAFE you get treated like you’re an adult so you don’t get undermined if you say one wrong thing. (Lucy)

Students also talked about the camaraderie within their groups and the ways in which students would share their knowledge:

They [peers] help with everything. Student X’s great with computers, student Y’s great with English and stuff like that. If you need a hand it’s like “here you go”. (Alex)

Experience of success and mastery

Many of the students stated that they had experienced limited success in their studies at school, but were doing well at TAFE:

Oh I hated it [school], I wasn’t an A student back at school. When I’ve been here I’ve passed near everything and at school I’d be struggling to pass one test. (David)

Students spoke passionately about the outcomes that they had achieved at TAFE. The mastery approach to learning gave students a sense of achievement. Rather than failing or doing poorly in subjects, students had a chance to complete tasks and become proficient at skills. In so doing, students’ academic self-confidence increased:

I’m learning heaps and I’ve improved a lot and … with English my confidence has grown because I’m not very good at English and so I’ve just grown with that stuff. (John)

Some of the stuff I had to do was relatively difficult and I feel good about the accomplishment, getting good marks for what I’ve done … I feel a lot smarter now, like I can handle my maths even better than what I used to, so I feel like I’m more ready, job ready. (Jack)

Another student talked about completing set tasks, gaining a sense of achievement, and receiving recognition from teachers. He had not experienced this at school:

I’ve already completed two or three assignments. My last assignment was not yesterday, the day before. It was a big presentation and I really worked hard on that. I used resources and stuff and the outcome was great. I haven’t achieved that at school … I got a pat on the back, not just a “righto, next”. (Ryan)

One student thought that TAFE should be promoted because it provides an alternative to failure at school.

Showing kids that it [TAFE] is here kind of thing. Because most kids don’t know, like they go to school and school isn’t for some kids and they’re sitting there thinking like, you know I’m going to fail, when there is something out here that they can go to. (Holly)

Discussion

The major themes identified in this study echo previous research findings. The young people in this study expressed a strong dislike of school. Such dislike is one of the major reasons given by young people for leaving school prior to completing Year 10 and 12 (Lamb et al. 2004). Moreover, the young people in this study frequently commented on aspects of schooling that are recognised as contributing to student disengagement – the restrictive culture of the school, negative relationships with teachers and peers, and not doing well academically (Willms
2003). In contrast, the students liked the TAFE environment. In particular they liked the relative freedom and flexibility of the TAFE environment, their relationships with teachers, positive interaction with peers and the opportunity to achieve success. These factors appeared to be helping these young people to recover from a sense of failure associated with secondary school and to re-engage with learning.

The findings from this study demonstrate that TAFE can and does provide a positive alternative for young people disengaged from school. As noted earlier, concerns have been raised about the place of institutions such as TAFE as sites for early school leavers with complex educational needs (Polesel 2010; Polesel, Nizinska & Kurantowicz 2011). In this study, students expressed overwhelmingly positive views of the TAFE environment as a place of learning. It is important to note that in this study all students were enrolled in foundation skills courses, which were taught by a small number of specialist teachers. The students were in small classes, and were provided with considerable one-on-one support and care.

TAFE can provide a positive alternative to school for young people, but questions remain regarding low course completion rates for early school leavers, particularly those enrolled in Certificate I and II courses (Polesel 2010; Karmel & Woods 2008). Yet, as the experiences of the young people in this study attest, course completion is only one measure of success. The participants spoke of the development of friendships and other respectful relationships, a sense of self-worth, increased self-confidence and mastery of concepts and skills. There is recognition in the literature that outcomes such as these are important in their own right (Zepke & Leach 2010; Willms 2003; Wyn 2007). We would agree, and argue further that students’ engagement or re-engagement with learning is fundamental to the achievement of specific course competencies and, ultimately, students’ completion of courses. It is certainly the case that completion of a foundation course may involve several attempts. It is important to bear in mind that students’ positive regard for TAFE, and experience of some success, will for many individuals increase the chances of their returning to TAFE, or a similar learning environment, to study again.

A final point for discussion concerns the role of secondary schools. Polesel (2010) argues that it is important to consider alternatives to the standard models of secondary schools in Australia given the disengagement experienced by some students. Moreover, Wyn, Stokes & Tyler (2004) make the case that “a small but significant group of young people will continue to experience disrupted pathways in their schooling” (italics in original) (p.32). Our study shows that TAFE can offer an important alternative for early school leavers disaffected from schooling. However, the students’ descriptions of their TAFE and school experiences also provide valuable insights into the question of how schools can become more engaging places for these students.

**Conclusion**

The young people in this study had all left school prior to completing Year 10. Early school leavers are among the most vulnerable in terms of experiencing opportunities for employment and further education. The voices of students who participated in this study highlight the important role that foundation courses in the VET sector can play in re-engaging young people in formal education. We give the last word in this paper to one of the young people in the study. It is a moving description of a young person re-engaging in education:

*There’s something here. I want to be here you know. Unlike school, at the end of the*
day at TAFE, you think. I’ve got to wait till tomorrow to come back ... When I leave TAFE, I don’t know, I’m surrounded by people who care you know. The teacher cares. Everything. I want to be here. (Ryan)

References


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