



Stories From Young People

Implications for Learning

John A Pitman

Summary - Survey findings

The complex of factors that might be associated with early leaving were found in the Junior Survey dataset. A policy position that is about early intervention, i.e. well before Senior, is perhaps the strongest indication of this research.

Summary - Survey findings

Students are already thinking about leaving before they reach Senior. In fact, in this dataset, 34 per cent of junior students indicated they had already seriously considered leaving school before Senior (the proportion is a little higher for Senior, being 40 per cent).

For both senior and junior populations the biggest reasons given for students being “turned off” by school before they complete Junior relate to teachers being “too strict, mean or unfair” and the work being “too hard” or “too much”. These sorts of reasons were given by, at most, 30 percent of survey respondents.

Again, the survey data seem to be saying that what teachers do matters most for students, including the nature of the personal teacher–student interactions in the school. Such areas of school functioning relate to more complex and intangible areas, but clearly good policy decision making can support quality personal interactions or it can make them harder to achieve. On the other hand, very few students in both groups tended to comment along the lines that teachers were “boring” and/or ineffective, or that subjects were “boring” or “irrelevant”.

three most commonly written-about ideas

- better or more teachers,
- better facilities, conditions or atmosphere at school,
- more “fun” or “hands-on” activities.

“It’s like a fresh start for kids in secondary school for those who were teased in primary”

“Wanting to belong is so important to people”

“I work at KFC and I’ve got 40 years of work in front of me. I want to stay studying for as long as I can. School sucks but work sucks more”.

not *optional* BUT *essential* content

life skills	manners	people skills	interview skills	common sense
teamwork	drug education	practical skills	social skills	communication
budgeting	investment	credit rating	HECS	paying bills
computers	spelling	study skills	pre-Year 11 courses	numeracy

Kelly's story

“I remember starting school at five years of age and it was great. The teachers were lovely, really nice to me. I knew what I had to do and they explained everything clearly, like you knew when you could go to the toilet and where everything was. I really loved it. But then I grew up and school stayed the same”.

Kelly's explanation

- I got treated like a kid when I was grown up.
- I had no say at all in what was going on.
- The teachers hated me, they were always picking on me.
- I couldn't follow the lessons.
- I couldn't see the point of what we were learning anyway.
- I got picked on by the other kids for being different.
- I was just Baaaad!

As Kelly put it

“I just want to get that Certificate. It doesn't really matter what I study because it's all pretty boring but I need to get my Senior to get a decent job”.

Students said they wanted

- a Senior Certificate
- to be engaged in learning if it leads to better chance of a job
- to be treated with respect
- to be treated like adults
- flexibility in when and how they learn
- to get through learning as quickly as possible
- to be able to study part-time if they had to
- a fresh start.

students did not want

- to go back into mainstream classroom
- to study solely for the sake of learning
- to be locked into a set pathway.

concerns consistently raised

1. Schools must be supported professionally, organisationally and financially to offer flexible pathways through Senior for all students.
2. Students and teachers should establish together long, medium and short-term goals in pursuit of a Senior Certificate. These goals can take the form of a formal agreement to be updated periodically as the students' or schools' situations change.

3. There needs to be opportunity for non-teaching staff, such as mentors, community members, employers, parents or peers to be part of the learning management process, to re-engage these students. For many students who have disengaged from learning teachers are seen as part of the problem.

4. For many students who disengage from the school system there must be the opportunity to leave the school system for a time without jeopardising their chances of completing their Senior at a later date. This will involve giving students the opportunity of moving in and out of the school system over a number of years, recognising learning from other sites and offering learning opportunities outside of traditional 9–3 timetables.

5. Effort must be made to ensure that all students take up their entitlement to a Senior Certificate, regardless of their background, current situation or relationship with their previous school(s). In many cases this must involve offering students a Fresh Start in a learning environment that is different from the traditional classroom. A learning environment that provides a safe place for at risk students to engage in Worthwhile Learning activities, achieve success and have that success recognised on a Senior Certificate.

6. Effort must be made to identify Worthwhile Learning for the future. While this case study found that pedagogy was a priority, we also found that students are currently motivated more by the certificate at the end of the learning than the learning itself.

Worthwhile Learning recognises that as the world changes so too must what we prioritise as worthwhile. The current process of top-down decisions as to what counts as Worthwhile Learning is seen as exclusive, too slow to accommodate change and geared towards a minority of employers and university faculties.