


Middle school: Engage them with learning before they lose heart

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During these middle years, they will

- Enter puberty – becoming teenagers
- Remain at home but enter into some adult roles
- Transition from Primary school to High school, &
- Decide **whether they will complete** year 12

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- ◆ Where are we now with middle school children: changing contexts, periods, settlements
 - ◆ Is early leaving still a problem? What are the consequences?
 - ◆ What can be done at the middle-school stage to increase high school completion rates?
 - ◆ What can be done to improve the transition from Primary to Secondary school?




Where are we now with middle school children?

- We have left behind a settled period where there were taken-for-granted ways that were accepted as legitimate by most stakeholders
- We have been through a period of dislocation, and now, many grown-ups feel like immigrants or outsiders

1. What has changed?



- Today's students are digital natives
- They parallel-process and prefer games to reading or 'work'
- We (the teachers) are the digital immigrants



*“ ... Every time I go to school I have to
power down ... ”*

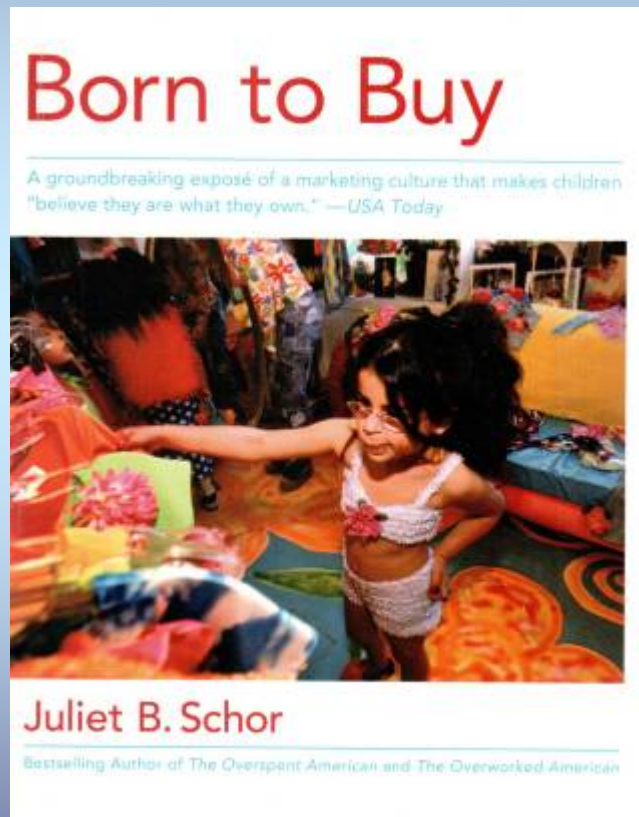
[Prensky 2001]

Television, computers, and games



- Most of what children do revolves around commodities
- The commodities are inter-connected: toys, computer-games, branded clothes, TV

2. What else has changed?




- For kids, access to high-status goods is vital as they make their way with their peer groups
- They are the first-adopters and avid users of new technologies (Schor, 2004)

Part of the cultural change towards a consumer-oriented society has been that



- *children's tastes* now influence market trends
- Tweens have become significant consumers in their own right
- They are often consulted about family decisions, including what car to purchase (30%)

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- There is a new alliance between children and marketers, targeted against against parents
 - The exploitation of children's anxiety in ads has increased steadily over the past few years
 - Fear and pressure are the two most common elements characterising the daily lives of tweens



The standard biography

- In the past, school was associated with ‘childhood’
- Children were small-bit players in the market and rarely influenced major adult choices
- Young people only took on adult roles only after they left school and gained full-time employment
- Ulrich Beck called this the ‘standard biography’



The standard biography is dead

- Children play bigger roles in family decisions and enter adult roles at an earlier stage
- Childhood has been commercialised, and many tweens have plans of becoming earners
- Half of Australia's high school students have a part-time job
- Many young people combine work and study

Shifting settlements: 10-14 year olds

- 1950 - 1980
 - The long post-war boom, low-skill / full employment, local manufacturing, most left school with an Intermediate Certificate
- 1980 - 1990
 - Rapid economic, cultural, and technological change. New emphasis on literacy benchmarks for all children.
- 1990 - present
 - Children are 'digital natives'. They assume adult roles at an early age. They are 'born to buy'.



Shifting settlements: 15-19 year olds

- 1950 – 1980 ➤ Settlement 1 - A small, talented minority completes year 11-12. The senior years culminate in a University admission exam
- 1980 - 1990 ➤ Settlement 2 - Almost all young people complete year 12. Only a small, disadvantaged minority leaves early
- 1990 - present ➤ Settlement 3 - The boundaries between school and work are blurred: many young people follow new combinations of education & work



Early leaving is still a cause for concern

- Of the 65 thousand students who entered year 7 in NSW public schools in 1997, approximately 20 thousand did not appear in year 12 classes six years later (i.e., 30.8 percent)
- The high school completion rate for Indigenous Australians is less than half the rate achieved by other Australians**

- * NSW-DET Future Directions, 2005.
- ** Lamb et al, Staying on at School, 2004, MCEETYA



Literacy and numeracy matter as well as HS completion

- Low literacy scores at the junior secondary level contribute to non-completion of high school*
- Those with high scores are less likely to be unemployed at age 19, even after years of schooling are taken into account*

* (LSAY research reports no 18, 19, 31, 34)

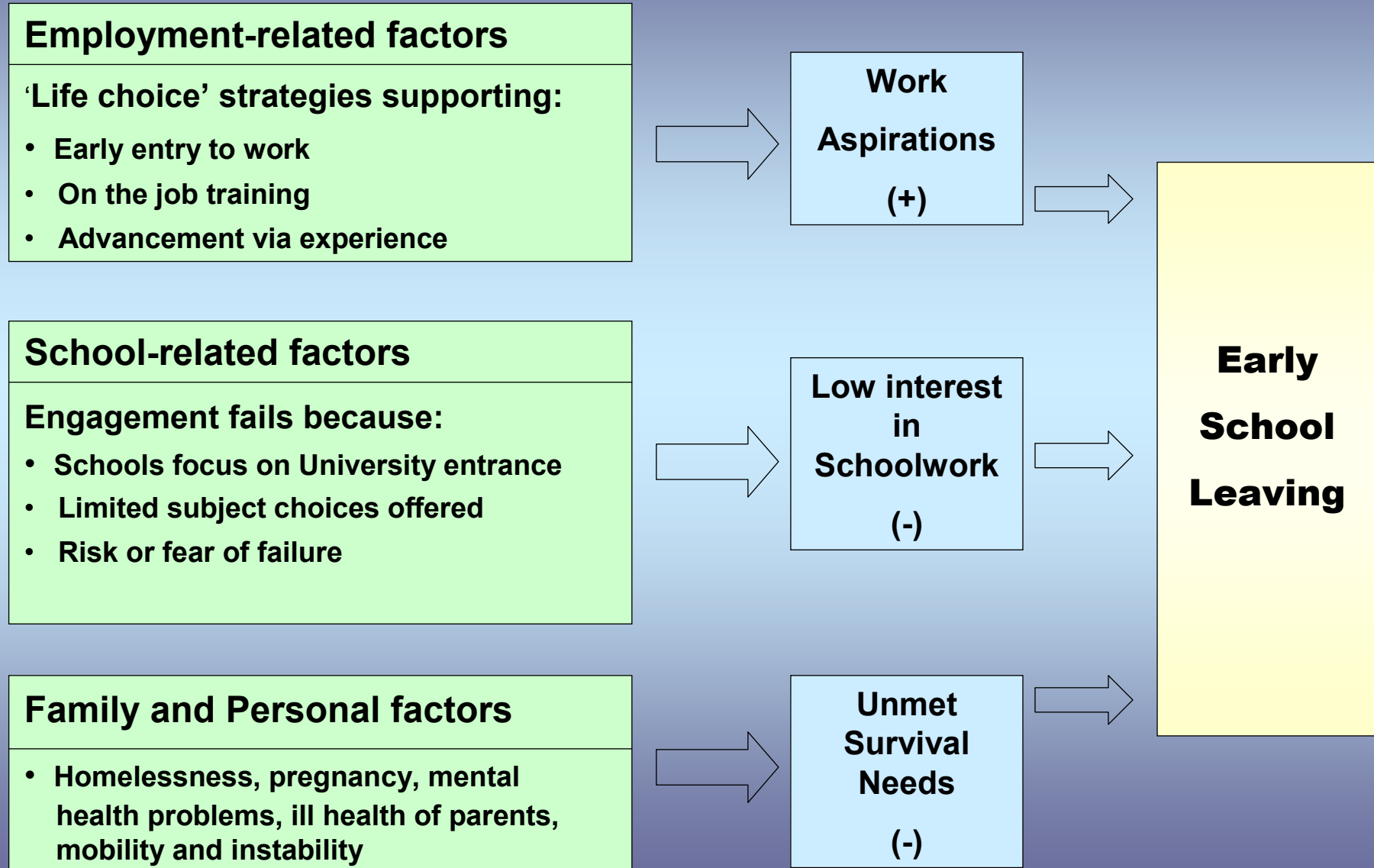
What can schools do about HSCRs?

Young people may be

- attracted to work
- or repelled by school
- or just trying to survive
- or all three combined

Schools need to respond to all these motives

Reasons young people give for early school leaving





Employment-related factors

- “I’ve got a job to go to”
- Drawn out by positive aspirations
- No stopping them if their families do not insist on ‘education first’
- Boys from ‘trade’ and unskilled families leave for apprenticeships or other jobs
- There are fewer such opportunities for girls

School-related factors

- “Don’t like school -- no good at it -- want to do other subjects, like at TAFE”
- Academic knowledge is constructed so that it includes ‘alienating’ cultural capital
- Engagement with school wanes as the scholarly demands increase
- VET in schools not ‘visible’ until Year 11 (Pitman report)



Family and Personal factors

- Young people whose families are very poor, where there is violence and abuse, come to school to survive
- They often carry huge family responsibilities
- Two-thirds of our homeless youth come from 15% of our high schools
- These schools need to function as community hubs (FSS) as well as places of learning



Early leaving: Tasks for the middle years

1. Recognise that the decision to leave school occurs during the middle years
2. Recognise that early literacy is vitally important
3. Create programs to support effective transitions into high school
4. Envision the future: both boys and girls will need to be politically aware and broadly educated

1. The decision to leave occurs by Year 9

- Year 9 students who say they will leave are seven times more likely to exit before Year 12 than those who say they will *not* leave (Marks et al, 2000)
- Pitman & Herschel (2001) found that many Year 8 students had lost heart, having never experienced anything other than written seat work focused on basic academic skills.



2. Literacy and numeracy matter as well as HS completion

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* (LSAY research reports no 18, 19, 31, 34)

3. Effective transitions into high school

- Grade 6 children going up to high school are often excited. They see the move as a sign of growing up, having achieved something
- Yet they are also anxious – they may lose their old friends and need to make new friends
- They often find approaching high school teachers quite intimidating*



3. Effective transitions into high school

- Grade 6 children are understandably anxious about getting lost, making room changes between classes, reading the timetable
- Evidence suggests they suffer a substantial reduction opportunities to play sport and outdoor games, as older students have possession of the playing spaces
- They are susceptible to anxiety, disengagement, and alienation from education

Perry, Dockett, Vickers, & Whitton 2006

4. Envision the future

- Across Australia, girls are more likely to complete year 12 than boys
- One view is that our schools are havens for the gentler sex, and that boys need a different kind of pedagogy or more female teachers
- A more plausible explanation is that a substantial group of boys leave early because they have greater access to apprenticeships

4. Envision the future

- Many boys are leaving school for lucrative jobs
- Often their only qualification is a strong back
- They are poorly qualified to re-enter education
- Boys and girls who leave early will not be well equipped to face the many social and political challenges we have set ourselves -

