

## WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

### A Review of the Educational and Vocational Interests of Marginalised Rural Youth

J.M. Gidley and P.H. Wildman

#### ABSTRACT

This article explores the disturbing and persistent phenomenon of 'street kids' in contemporary Australia, through a model intersecting youth unemployment, homelessness and truancy. Recent educational reforms and Australian field research on 'street kids' are examined. Secondly, a qualitative study with rural 'street kids' which investigates their educational and vocational interests is explicated. It was found that the youth were strongly motivated particularly towards creative, practical and life skills learning that could help them construct 'meaning' and purpose'. The authors recommend innovative pilot programs with the youth using collaborative processes such as action learning.

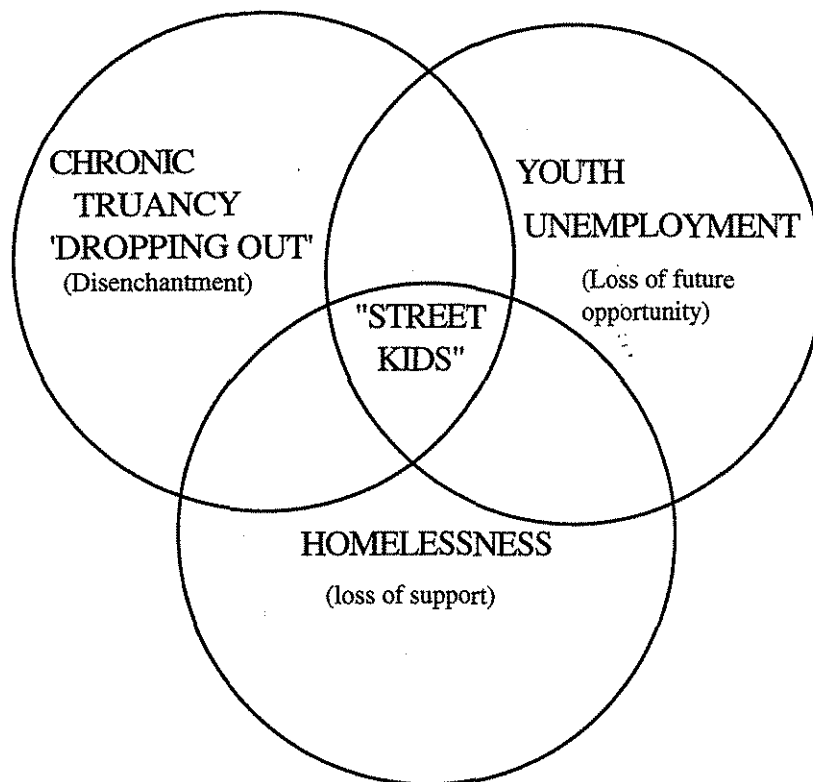
#### INTRODUCTION

Australian rural towns have seen an increase in number and visibility of 'street kids' over the past decade as more and more vocations become redundant (Gidley and Wildman, 1995a; Wildman and Stokes, 1990). The authors believe these indications should be taken extremely seriously as portends of an underlying failure in our social and school system to equip students with practical skills to 'make their own meaning in life'.

The authors have developed a theoretical model which contextualises the phenomenon of 'street kids' and is grounded in over a decade's research work. We will use a general definition of 'street kids' to refer to youth of any age not attending full-time school or work, who spend much of their daily time around the streets of their town or neighbourhood and who may or may not also be homeless.

The results of our research to date suggest that understanding of 'street kids' will be enhanced by an examination of recent developments in three overlapping arenas of social change: rising youth unemployment; increasing youth homelessness; and ongoing educational disenchantment indicated by continuing high rates of chronic truancy and 'dropping out' (See Figure 1 below). The impact of these three factors in combination with rurality is the focus of the field research explicated in the second part of this paper.

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and  
Communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication  
And otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAL to ACER. For more  
Information contact CAL on (02) 9394-7600 or [info@copyright.com.au](mailto:info@copyright.com.au)



**Figure 1: Street Kids: Three Intersecting Causalities (Gidley and Wildman, 1995a)**  
 Source (Wildman, 1993) adapted.

This paper will focus on the educational factor in this trio. The authors have elsewhere comprehensively reviewed the literature on the three above-mentioned socio-educational issues as they impact school aged youth (Gidley and Wildman, 1995a & c).

### **EDUCATIONAL DISENCHANTMENT AND TRUANCY**

The recognition of the marginalisation of many youth by rising unemployment was foreshadowed by increased emphasis on retention at school. Yet chronic truancy as well as homelessness was already recognised as a major problem by Burdekin (1989). Estimates are that chronic daily truancy rates were 22,000, in NSW (1985); over 3,000 in South Australia (1992) and 8,000 in Western Australia (1991) (Beresford, 1993). This would place current national figures for truancy at close to an estimated 100,000.

Cameron-Jackson (1995) cites such issues as dwindling incomes, alienation from the urban-based educational ethos of schools, and sometimes negative small community attitudes to education as contributing to the further marginalisation of rural youth. Why so many young people are disenchanted with school is a question that will not be resolved by increased pressure on them to stay at school.

In an attempt to come to terms with this pending challenge, research was undertaken early this decade into young people's views of post-compulsory education and training, as a basis for policy reforms (Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee - Finn Report

1991). Key findings indicated problems with curriculum relevance and context, relationships with teachers, and the structure of schools (pp.11 - 31). The Report also recognised that the

*"deeply disadvantaged young people have been failed by the inability of the schooling system to understand them, and to address their needs.... (particularly)...for the increasing numbers (who) are unable to live in the parental household and find themselves in the refuge circuit and/or on the streets" (p.195) (RAECRC,1991).*

These findings were confirmed by a study of 725 youth throughout Australia, commissioned by the Australian Youth Foundation in 1993 which claimed that "more than half a million young people aged between 15 and 24 are living on the margins of Australian society participating in neither full-time work nor education" (Daniel and Connell, 1993).

In a policy review and analysis of the types of reform required to address early school leaving Beresford (1993, p. 22) stressed the need for curriculum reform including formulating a real-life skills curriculum, social skills training, self-esteem and goal-setting programs. He also pointed to the need to overcome the alienation some students feel as a function of inflexible institutional structures and poor student-teacher relationships (p.23).

We believe such concern by the various educational reviews focuses only on the immediate and belies a much deeper recognition of social system failure. Our research with rural youth however extends this analysis to include the youth's feelings of a lack of meaning and future direction (Gidley et al., 1995c). In turn this leads to a lack of purpose or agency in their lives and at a crucial point in their socialisation process.

### **Subsequent reforms - vocational education**

The above findings prompted major reforms such as the introduction of the Australian Vocational Certificate (AVC) Training System, and the proposed replacement of the examination system by the introduction of Key Competencies (Carmichael 1992; Mayer 1992). Taking a critical view of these reforms however leads one to ask how well they will be able to provide solutions to the complex problems of rising youth unemployment, and educational disenchantment particularly in rural areas?

1. Improving the skills and training of youth does not necessarily create more employment. Warnings were sounded as early as 1987 by the Senate Standing Committee on Science, Technology and the Environment, about the lack of employment opportunities in spite of improved education of youth (Eckersley 1988).
2. With youth unemployment rates being three times that of the adult rate, even 'politically acceptable' unemployment levels of 8% leave youth unemployment in some rural areas at over 30%. When combined with underemployment this can contribute to the development of an underclass of around one million people, many of whom are likely to be rural youth. Carmichael himself admits that " 10% of new entrants to the workforce will be unlikely to benefit from his proposals for structured training" (P.93) (SCCEET, 1992).
3. Increased official 'retention rates' belie the realities of actual school attendance. Targets formulated by the Finn Report (1991) propose that by 1995, 'almost all' young people should complete Year 12 or equivalent, and yet it is found that the retention of students to Year 12 in 1994 was still only 73% (Jones, 1995). Furthermore, of those officially enrolled in schools, increasing numbers of students are truanting or 'dropping out', especially in rural areas where the numbers of students completing their secondary schooling is actually declining (CSC, 1988).

4. Finally , it is suggested that the new emphasis on skills and competencies with its underlying mechanistic assumptions about human nature, may well contribute further to the youth's lack of a sense of meaning in life, and disenchantment with education (Gidley and Wildman 1995b; Eckersley 1992).

### WHAT'S MISSING?

It is interesting to compare Australia's 'street kids' today with the trend occurring in the early Twentieth Century in the German Youth Movement. In a deep analysis of this phenomenon early this century Steiner (1967) claimed that the young are really asking :  
" Where are we to obtain spiritual nourishment ?"(p.95). Steiner continues..

*Have the older people an answer to this? And it became clear to the young that no such answer was to be found in the schools, so they drifted out into the fields. They preferred instead of being school boys and girls, to become birds - birds of passage. (Wandervogel) (Steiner, 1967, p. 118).*

Today so many of the fields have become tar and cement or targets in computer games. The importance of moral/ethical and spiritual values in helping youth establish their own meaning through education has been stressed by Eckersley (1992) and Beare and Slaughter (1993). The consequences of a lack of spiritual dimension in the Australian culture generally has been indicated by Tacey (1995) as has the vital need for this potential to be awakened.

The advantages to all students, particularly those who may experience 'time out of school or work', of offering creative, personal development, and life skills classes has been suggested by much of the research (Beresford, 1993; Gidley et al., 1995b; SCCEET, 1992; Winefield, Tiggeman, Winefield, & Goldney, 1993).

Some important personal insights into the educational merit of this 'values' dimension have been gained by the first author in her experience of founding a Rudolf Steiner School in the local region. This approach to education is based on an integrated, wholistic view of the child and works at developing the artistic, imaginative and social aspects as well as the intellectual and physical. It acknowledges the moral, spiritual dimension to life and emphasises the real-life context and interconnectedness of the curriculum (Gidley, 1993).

Further the present authors in investigating why a group of rural youth had left school as early as 13, found that they felt the schooling as offered lacked meaning for their lives (Gidley et al. 1995c). It appears that 'meaning' for these youth as a sort of futures focused values dimension giving direction to their lives is fundamentally lacking in much Australian curriculum, thus contributing to the high truancy and 'drop-out' rates.

### SCHOOLING ALTERNATIVES OR ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING?

As yet only a few studies have been identified which investigate the educational needs and interests of the 'street kids' who are impacted by these social issues. This is a significant area of research which has been largely overlooked. Much of the background literature mainly deals with the problems of over-15 year olds, yet significant problems also exist for under 15s, many of whom are homeless and not attending school (Beresford, 1993).

A recent quantitative study found that a significant number of 12-18 year olds not attending school (91% of 22 youth) indicated that they were interested in alternative educational activities if available (Gidley and Wildman, 1995e). A flexi-school for 'street kids' in Brisbane provides an environment where there are no uniforms, no classes, discipline is less obvious, the work is self-paced and the youth are not threatened by the tutors or the environment. Hempel claimed

that successes included development of self-esteem, improved attitudes, better behaviour and skills development, as well as academic success (Hempel, 1993).

An alternative school for adolescent 'school refusers' in Nowra, Southern New South Wales, also catered for the individual needs of the students through an 'Individual Education Program'. Results showed improvements in students' attendance records, student-home relationships, and self-esteem (Brand, 1993). An integrated, client-centred employment skills training program for homeless, unemployed youth in Brisbane saw ten of the fourteen participants proceed to employment or further education (Wildman and Stokes, 1990).

### **A vital Question**

The research reviewed suggests that so-called 'marginalised youth' might benefit from individualised programs, and be interested in alternative educational activities. This study seeks to address the question:

*'what kinds of educational or occupational programs or activities are disenchanted rural youth interested in participating in, to give their lives meaning and purpose?'*

### **FIELD RESEARCH WITH MARGINALISED RURAL YOUTH**

The population studied was young people of both sexes, aged between 12 and 18 years of age, inclusive, not attending full-time school or work, and spending most of their daily activity around the streets of the target town.

Data was gathered through a self report survey questionnaire. Prior to the administration of the survey the first author had undertaken a series of observations and interviews with the youth and youth workers over several months. (Gidley et al, 1995b)

The survey was designed to elicit information on socio-demographics, educational background and future educational interests. The results of much of this is the subject of other reports (Gidley and Wildman, 1995a, c & 1995e). Twenty-two of the 30 surveys were returned completed, which (from anecdotal evidence from the youth) appeared to be at least 80% of the total group.

The purpose of the survey was described to the youth thus:

*'to learn more about the young people not attending school and to find out whether they are interested in any classes or activities if these could be organised'.*

Some challenges encountered during the research process included the sensitivity of the youth to authority and bureaucracy, their low self-esteem, possible literacy difficulties and the potential impact of the drug culture in their town.

### **Findings - Alternatives and Interests**

Data from open-ended questions was coded into 'units of information' according to the methods of Guba and Lincoln (1991) and recorded onto file cards, which were then sorted into categories, as suggested by Merriam (1988).

The youth were asked what they thought would work for them as an alternative to school. The results of analysis of this question are summarised below in Table 1.

**Table 1: Youth's Possible Alternatives to School.**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Properties</b>
1. Occupation/ Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- a full-time job</li><li>- a good job</li><li>- something to keep me occupied</li></ul>
2. Alternative School Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- tribal environment</li><li>- more freedom of choice</li><li>- less structure</li><li>- school without walls</li><li>- being treated like a person</li><li>- home schooling</li></ul>
3. Curriculum (Alternative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- subjects of interest</li><li>- alternative education</li><li>- things I like studying</li><li>- informal courses</li><li>- maybe TAFE</li></ul>
4. Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- I'm not sure</li><li>- what I'm doing now</li><li>- wandering</li><li>- a gun</li></ul>

**Source: Gidley, 1995.**

Table 1 demonstrates that the youth were interested in alternatives to their situation. Some indicated they wanted work and the majority spoke of educational alternatives with structural and/or curriculum changes to what they have experienced. Note also under the category of 'uncertainty' a small group express nervousness, loss of direction and potential violence.

To further develop this aspect, the youth were asked as part of the survey to indicate their interest or preference for a range of classes/activities which included personal development, living skills, practical, School Certificate/HSC, creative/artistic and other. (See Table 2 - Females; and Table 3- Males).

**Table 2: Interest in Alternative Classes - Females**

Case No.	Personal Develop.	Living Skills	Practical	School Certif.	Creative Artistic	Other
11	X	X	X	X	X	
12	X	X		X	X	
13		X				
14		X				
15		X			X	
16	X		X		X	Photography music Photog.
17	X	X	X	X	X	
18	X	X	X		X	
19		X	X		X	*
20				X	X	
21	X	X		X	X	Photog.

\* Magic, herbs, astrology, astronomy, spiritual healing, UFO'S, the truth about our Heritage.

Source: Gidley, 1995.

**Table 3: Interest in Alternative Classes - Males**

Case No.	Personal Develop.	Living Skills	Practical	School Certif.	Creative Artistic	Other
1			X			
2	X	X	X	X	X	
3			X			
4		X	X	X	X	Party
5		X	X		X	
6	X	X	X		X	Too many Every- thing
7						
8			X			
9		X	X		X	A TAFE course
10		X	X	X	X	Rock climbing
22						(nil)

Source: Gidley, 1995

An interesting and unexpected gender difference emerged. For the females the strongest interests indicated were in the creative/artistic areas and also the living skills. Personal development also emerged more strongly for the females. On the other hand the males showed a remarkably strong interest in practical activities and also considerable interest in living skills and creative/artistic classes.

## **Youth Videos as Outcome**

Two videos were also produced by the youth at the time of this research and the themes interwove with the focus on their needs and interests demonstrating the reflexivity of the research. The statements of the youth in the videos provide good validation of the categories developed on educational interests especially the creative classes sought by the girls. In addition a strong sense of the importance of community spirit was evident (Anderson, 1995).

## **SO WHAT DO RURAL YOUTH WANT?**

The responses of the youth in terms of alternative educational interests indicated their motivation to be occupied as expected (Tables 1, 2 & 3). A very strong interest was indicated for creative/artistic courses, living skills and practical activities (15,15 and 14 youth respectively, of the 22 surveyed, chose these classes). This is consistent with the literature (Beresford, 1993; Brand, 1993; Gidley et al., 1995b; SCCEET, 1992; Wildman et al. 1990; Winefield et al., 1993).

### **Gendered interests**

Personal development classes were more highly preferred by the girls than the boys. Other gender differences were evident in that the girls showed very high preferences for creative/artistic classes (e.g. craft, painting, drama and music) and living skills (cooking, sewing and growing food) compared with the boys (Table 3). On the other hand, the boys virtually all chose practical skills (e.g. car maintenance, building) compared with slightly less than half the girls (Table 2).

Although most of the literature on these youth has not explored the issue of gender differences, these findings are consistent with the pedagogical indications that gender differences are often at their most extreme around and just after the time of puberty. Speaking of the importance of teachers understanding the inner life of youth at this stage of critical change Steiner (1965) claims that 'the boys need subjects that will lead them to come to grips with practical life ....that will bring them into touch with the external world'. He also indicated that the motivation of girls would be increased at this age if attention is paid to the 'artistic, aesthetic nature of what is being taught (p.4). Although

we recognise the essential conservatism in this finding it is not entirely out of line with recent discussion over the need for affirmative action for boys as well as girls.

### **WHAT NEXT?**

We believe our findings have important practical implications for action requiring resourcing and piloting, at least at the local level. Recent quantitative research with this group found it to be very representative of the wider region, and to a degree rural Australia itself, from which the population was drawn (Gidley et al. 1995e).

In terms of educational theory and policy it needs to be understood that the lack of meaning, purpose and disenchantment many youth feel with school is not being adequately addressed by the current reforms (Carmichael 1992; Mayer 1992; RAECRC[Finn]). Nor will more calls for law and order or curfews address the deeper needs of these youth. The educational infrastructure of rural areas needs to be re-invented in ways that incorporate youth voices (Hutchinson, 1994).

Our research suggests a need for alternative educational environments for these youth based on models such as those described (Hempel, 1993; Brand, 1993; Wildman et al., 1990; Gidley, 1993). It would need to address not only the vocational and contextual needs of students but



also to attend to life skills, practical and artistic, and personal development needs identified in this research.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In the current rural context of diminishing employment opportunities and increasing urbanisation of life-styles, many rural youth are creating their own meaning through the streets. They are able to voice their needs and interests if only the responsible adults will listen. Future research will need actively to listen to their views and involve them collaboratively in developing and actioning a 'view with a future'. Indeed it is our firm opinion that yet further enquiries will do little more than chart an ever growing litany of failure by policy developers to deliver effective policies.

What is needed is action in the form of pilot educational programs to establish alternative educational environments for these youth, in particular those providing extended work-experiential opportunities. Such educational environments would foster in youth the broader values inherent in the term capability, rather than merely training them in skills and competencies. Our preference would also be to extend this into a broader 'community learning' situation.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. (1995) THE NIMBIN SCENE Linc TV, Lismore.
- Beare, H. and Slaughter, R. (1993) EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY, Routledge, London and NY.
- Beresford, Q. (1993) The really hard cases, YOUTH STUDIES AUSTRALIA, 12(4), 15-25.
- Brand, D. (1993) The Park Road Centre: an alternative school for adolescent school refusers, YOUTH STUDIES AUSTRALIA, vol 12 no 4 pp. 26-29.
- Burdekin, B. (1989) OUR HOMELESS CHILDREN, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, AGPS, Canberra.
- Cameron-Jackson, F. (1995) Semantic complexities in Defining Rurality: towards a definition based on human considerations, EDUCATION IN RURAL AUSTRALIA, vol. 5 (1), pp. 1-7.
- Carmichael, L. (1992) THE AUSTRALIAN VOCATIONAL CERTIFICATE TRAINING SYSTEM, Skills Formation Council, National Board of Employment, Education and Training.
- Commonwealth Schools Commission (1988) SCHOOLING IN RURAL AUSTRALIA. Canberra. Curriculum Development Centre.
- Corbett, B. (1993) Street kids to school kids: Education as a solution to homelessness, YOUTH STUDIES AUSTRALIA, 12(2), 38-44.
- Daniel, A. and Connell, J. (1993) A LOST GENERATION, The Australian Youth Foundation, East Sydney.
- Eckersley, R. (1988) CASUALTIES OF CHANGE: THE PREDICAMENT OF YOUTH IN AUSTRALIA, Australia's Commission for the Future, Melbourne.
- Eckersley, R. (1992) YOUTH AND THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE, Apocalypse No! Series. Australia's Commission for the Future, Melbourne.
- Gidley, J. (1993) INNOVATIVE SECONDARY CURRICULUM, North Coast International School for Rudolf Steiner Education, (unpublished).
- Gidley, J. and Wildman, P. (1995a) Jumping ship to find their wings: a qualitative study into marginalised rural youth opting out of a school system they feel doesn't care, JOBS FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS: MAKING THE FUTURE WORK, Social Justice Research Foundation Inc, Adelaide.
- Gidley, J. and Wildman, P. (1995b) Friday's children - 'street kids' who use the streets as 'school, home and occupation - an ethnographic study of marginalised youth in a small Australian rural town. Accepted as an Abstract to the 13TH INTERNATIONAL QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS CONFERENCE ON ETHNOGRAPHY, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.
- Gidley, J. and Wildman, P. (1995c) The life of school or the school of life - a qualitative study of the educational perspectives of 'street kids' in a small rural town in northern New South Wales. Submitted to the JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES.

- Gidley, J. and Wildman, P. (1995e) A QUANTITATIVE SURVEY OF THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF 'STREET KIDS' IN A SMALL RURAL TOWN IN NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES. Southern Cross University, Lismore (unpublished).
- Guba, E. and Lincoln, Y. (1991) What is the Constructive Paradigm?, KNOWLEDGE FOR POLICY: IMPROVING EDUCATION THROUGH RESEARCH, eds. D.S Anderson and B. Biddle, London: Farmer Press.
- Hempel, J. (1993) Three Golden Rules - no sex, no violence and no drugs: a school for street kids, UNICORN, 19(2), 5-7.
- HOMELESSNESS BIBLIOGRAPHY (1993) The Salvation Army, Mont Albert, Victoria.
- Hutchinson, F. (1992) FUTURES CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SCHOOL, PHD Thesis, UNE Armidale, (unpublished).
- Hutchinson, F. (1994) Educating beyond Fatalism and Impoverished Imagination, PEACE, ENVIRONMENT AND EDUCATION, 4(4), 36-57.
- Jones, C. (1995) Jobs, training, depress school retention rates, THE AUSTRALIAN, HEC, Jan.
- Mayer, E. (1992) KEY COMPETENCIES, Sands and McDougall, Australia.
- Merriam, S. (1988) CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION, Sage, Newberry Park, California. Ch. 8, 123-146.
- Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee (Finn Report) (1991) YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND TRAINING, vol. 3. Appendix 2. Commissioned Reports.
- SSCEET (1992) WANTED OUR FUTURE: A REPORT INTO THE IMPLICATIONS OF SUSTAINED HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE (15-24 YEAR OLDS), Government Printer, Canberra.
- Steiner, R. (1967)[1922] THE YOUNGER GENERATION: EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL IMPULSES IN THE 20TH CENTURY, (13 lectures), N.Y. Anthroposophic Press, 118.
- Steiner, R. (1965)[1921] SUPPLEMENTARY COURSE: THE UPPER SCHOOL. Translated Sussex, G.B.: Michael Hall, Lecture V, pp. 1-10.
- Tacey, D. (1995) EDGE OF THE SACRED: TRANSFORMATION IN AUSTRALIA, Harper Collins, Australia.
- Wildman, P. (1993) COMMUNITIES WORKING AND LEARNING, PHD Thesis, 420 pp. (unpublished).
- Wildman, P. & Stokes, M. (1990) Getting homeless youth into employment and training: a Queensland pilot project, YOUTH STUDIES AUSTRALIA, 1990, August, pp.36-42.
- Winefield, A., Tiggeman, M., Winefield, M., and Goldney, R. (1993) GROWING UP WITH UNEMPLOYMENT: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT, Routledge, London.