How are young people’s experiences of ‘home’ affecting their engagement with schooling and community?

Little consideration has been given to the influence of housing tenure on young people’s developmental pathways. This paper draws on empirical findings from research conducted in the northern suburbs of Adelaide in 2009 to highlight how secure and quality housing tenure, when combined with familial support and positive relationships with teachers and peers, can support schooling and community engagement. The implications of these findings are significant in terms of informing Australian youth policy, especially school retention policies. The findings also highlight the need for housing policies (affecting young people) to recognise the tremendous impact that housing tenure can have on young people’s social transitions.

It has been widely asserted that current policy mantras, here and abroad, emphasise the importance of education, especially school retention, in preventing and responding to youth social exclusion (Savelsberg 2009; Wyn 2009; Lamb et al. 2004). This policy position has been adopted by Australian and British governments in the form of policy initiatives that link the provision of income support to educational engagement. Central to these policies are two assumptions, one is that school retention is the best means of facilitating young people’s transition from school to work and, ultimately, tackling social exclusion. The second is that young people and their parents need to be “responsibilised”, by force where necessary (through punitive measures such as withholding income support), to move into socially inclusive pathways.

Of particular concern is the fact that these policies are based on the assumption that all young people have relatively uniform and stable social circumstances, such as supportive parents within a functional domestic context, and fairly secure housing tenure. There is now a considerable body of research that demonstrates that this assumption does not hold true for many young people in Australia and abroad (France 2008; Savelsberg 2009). Rather, for many young people on the margins, life is often characterised by dysfunctional familial relationships, problematic access to secure and safe accommodation, and ill health. As Savelsberg and Martin-Giles (2008) have shown, these highly stressful circumstances can result in young people becoming trapped in a “social exclusion vortex”,...
incapable of engaging with the education system in any meaningful way and bereft of government support and assistance.

**Background**

**Understanding housing tenure**

Over the last decade, profound changes have occurred in relation to Australian housing tenure. Disney (South Australian Council of Social Service 2007, p.79) provides a useful and succinct summary of these changes:

- average house prices relative to income have almost doubled
- the proportion of first home buyers has fallen by approximately 20%
- average monthly payments on new loans have risen by approximately 50%
- opportunities to rent public housing have fallen by at least 30%.

The consequences of these changes for young people and their families have been significant. For example, as Yates and Milligan (2007) argue, more low-income households are experiencing housing uncertainty as a result of being forced out of the housing market (due to high housing prices) and into poor quality, low cost, private rental accommodation. Moreover, this type of housing tends to be located in communities characterised by high unemployment, social disadvantage, transient households and scarce resources. Consequently, for young people living in these communities, this often means that access to developmental opportunities is severely limited or non-existent.

**The importance of ontological security, identity work and family support**

Padgett (2007, p.1926) defines ontological security as the feeling of wellbeing that arises from a sense of constancy in one’s social and material environment. According to Hulse and Saugeres (2008, p.12), an individual’s self-identity, which incorporates a sense of purpose and belonging, is “developed on the bedrock of order and continuity” (or ontological security) and enables people to make sense of their experiences and interaction with others.

A qualitative data collection methodology was used to capture young people’s experiences of where they lived during their high school years. Specifically, the aims of the research were to explore the effects of housing tenure on family relationships and the ability of families to provide stable, supportive and resourceful domestic contexts for young people; and to investigate the effects of housing tenure on young people’s connectedness to other social contexts, particularly schooling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a conversational...
style that is consistent with “voiced research”, an approach Smyth and Hattam (2001, p.407) suggest can be conducive to drawing out perspectives that have been previously excluded or silenced by dominant structures and discourses. The conversations were audiotaped and conducted in settings that were familiar to the young people. Each participant was interviewed once for the purpose of this study with interviews ranging from 45 to 90 minutes in duration.

Regrettfully, time constraints associated with Honours research projects limited the sample size to four young women and four young men. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years. They were recruited from the tenant register of Unity Housing Company (a leading community housing provider in South Australia), and via referral from the Neighbourhood Development Officer, City of Playford. By recruiting young people who lived in a variety of tenure types in a region noted for persistent social and economic disadvantage, it was anticipated that the research would capture the experiences of young people who were likely to have had some degree of problematic housing during their high school years.

The data were initially coded on the basis of young people’s histories with housing and schooling. That is, the data were grouped to show how many young people moved home and/or changed schools, the location of the moves and how often moves occurred. Further codes were then developed to highlight emerging themes, such as family processes, social connectedness and educational attainment. Finally, the data were selectively coded to highlight subthemes, emphasise young people’s descriptions of their experiences and identify particular responses that best illustrated the key themes that emerged from the research.

The findings were thematically analysed using a framework underpinned by a broad conceptualisation of social transitions to allow for the diversity of life experiences among participants. The use of a constructionist approach to thematic analysis facilitated an understanding of the manner in which young people’s life experiences are shaped by a range of structures and discourses operating within society, including the dynamic processes of social exclusion.

**Findings and discussion**

Between them, the eight participants had lived in a total of 26 homes throughout their high school years. The tenure types were a mix of private and public rental accommodation, community housing rental and home ownership, and all homes were located in areas of social and economic hardship. While the data indicated that housing quality and location of housing presented a number of issues for young people, what stood out most strongly in this research was the impact of residential mobility on family, school and community relationships.

Although all participants experienced residential mobility, two distinct groups could be discerned. One group (Group One: 5 participants) experienced multiple moves in and out of surrounding areas which resulted in high levels of school mobility. The other group (Group Two: 3 participants) also lived in multiple homes during their high school years; however, all of their moves were in close proximity and did not require them to change schools.

There were also clear differences between the two groups in relation to school retention, post-schooling outcomes, familial support, relationships with teachers and peers, community engagement and their perceptions around future prospects. In regards to schooling, all of Group One spoke of “wagging” school and repeated school suspensions and none had managed to complete their secondary education, whereas all of the Group Two participants had completed their high school education.

A similar picture emerged in relation to the participants’ post-schooling outcomes. At the time of the interviews, none of the Group One participants had embarked on an educational, training or employment pathway, all reported issues with their mental health and wellbeing and most reported that they had experienced problems obtaining accommodation since leaving the family home. Conversely, all of Group Two participants were either in full or part-time work or enrolled in tertiary education.

There were also marked differences between the two groups in relation to the type and level of familial support and their relationships with peers, teachers and community members. All of the Group One participants reported stressful relationships within the family home and spoke
of holding one or both parents in contempt (except for one young person whose parents were both deceased), while Group Two participants reported consistent and reliable parenting. Group One participants, in stark contrast to Group Two participants who described positive school and community relationships, reported strained or non-existent links with peers, teachers and community.

In regard to participant perceptions of future prospects, all but one of the Group One participants did not believe they would ever get a job or a house they liked. In contrast, all of Group Two participants felt that they were on the “right track” in terms of where their education and employment pathways would lead.

Overall, the research data confirmed housing quality and location and residential mobility as factors that can affect a young person’s capacity to connect with their school and community. Further, the impact of insecure housing tenure and high housing mobility on young people’s schooling and community engagement was found to be particularly severe when it occurred within problematic family, school and community contexts.

**Domestic context**

Group One participants spoke of their parents having little to no control over housing options. They also reported limited parental engagement with schooling and a lack of family support in general. These young people felt abandoned when encountering conflicts with teachers and peers and anxious about making curriculum choices without support. They did not feel able to complete homework due to a lack of space and quiet time to study and did not feel like they “mattered” because their parents did not attend school functions. As Hulse and Saugeres (2008) argue, young people living in the family home can be vulnerable to some of the effects of homelessness, such as a lack of security and stability, no sense of belonging and no place to rely on and call one’s own. Under these circumstances, some young people could be described as being “homeless at home” (Hulse & Saugeres 2008).

These findings support suggestions by Robinson and Adams (2008) that the anxiety and stress associated with insecure housing may contribute to poor parenting skills and family conflict, which can result in young people becoming depressed, aggressive or difficult for parents to manage. Similarly, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2005) argue that high stress levels can contribute to “harsh” parenting styles, which may include critical and unresponsive attitudes to young people and physical punishment. While a range of factors may have contributed to the high stress levels experienced by many of the Group One participants’ families, housing uncertainty certainly emerged as an exacerbating factor. One participant talked about her mother’s stress levels during multiple moves in and around “poor” areas; she also spoke of a physical altercation with her mother which was the catalyst for another change of home and school:

> Mum was going off and hit me in the head with a piece of broken china before school. I ended up at the counsellor’s office and she helped me move again, this time to my sister’s place but I had to change schools – again.

Securing and maintaining housing tenure was challenging for all of the families, yet participants from Group Two were more likely than Group One participants to perceive their mothers as coping well and able to provide high levels of support. The mothers of Group Two participants were described as being constant and persistent in their pursuit of accommodation with secure tenure within the same neighbourhood, which in turn fostered the perception that they had some control over their circumstances. This finding supports Dupuis and Thorns’ (1998) contention that being empowered with a sense of control facilitates the development of ontological security.

The impact of high residential mobility on Group Two participants seems to have been mitigated by their perceived sense of constant and reliable parenting. For instance, several respondents reported that their mother demonstrated an acute awareness of the need to provide constancy and stability (for her children) and actively sought means of achieving this, such as being involved in school and community life and ensuring that residential moves were in close proximity:

> Mum definitely wanted us to stay in the area and kept struggling to pay rent [private rental] until this house [long-term community housing
rental] came up. It was good I didn’t have to change schools because I kept the same home room teacher from Year 8 and she was really good to me. Also, Mum already knew the teachers there and I think that teachers definitely treat you better when they know your parent ...

Mum was always at the school helping out with things so she knew all the teachers and all my friends too …

Indeed, Australian and international research has confirmed that parental engagement with schooling acts as a critical support for young people and facilitates improved educational attainment (see Cooper & Crosnoe 2007; Berthelsen & Walker 2008). Further, as Berthelsen and Walker (2008) attest, parents who are already a part of the school community can be a vital source of information about school policies for new parents and can facilitate their engagement with school life. However, for parents who make multiple residential moves (especially when these moves are coupled with school moves), the likelihood of engaging with other parents and developing supportive networks between school and community life is significantly reduced (Pettit & McLanahan 2003).

School context
Residential mobility also impacted on the ability of participants to form positive and enduring relationships with peers and teachers, particularly when coupled with school mobility. As a result, Group One participants tended to report feelings of “not fitting in”, being an “outsider”, being “bullied” and being a “loner”. Fractured attachments to community and peers also appeared to foster feelings of isolation and apathy among Group One:

I didn’t really have any friends. In Year 8 I did but after that I just kept to myself in the next school. I didn’t really belong and I didn’t really end up liking school so instead I used to get the train to my brother’s every day and hang out with someone I knew. After that we moved out here and it didn’t go that anymore so I just kept to myself again …

These findings align with previous research undertaken by Lee and Breen (2007) which found that young people who are deprived of a sense of belonging often experience multiple negative outcomes, including increased social rejection and bullying. Smyth (2006) argues that, in these situations, schooling hinders the development of relational trust and the facilitation of identity work. For young people in this situation, school is a hostile place where they “don’t fit in” and struggle to make positive connections with teachers and peers:

I had to go to special ed classes just to catch up because of my situation, not because I was dumb but the teachers treated us all like we were trouble in that class. It was hard to keep making new friends and pick up where I left off because I was constantly moving house and school so I just gave up …

In stark contrast, Group Two participants were able to build social networks and maintain relationships with teachers and peers:

It was good [not having to change schools after moving house], yeah much easier to continue with my classes and all the same people. My work ed coordinator was great, he helped me get into the courses I needed to do what I wanted and that made it easy to finish Year 12. He still pops into my work now to see how I’m getting on …

The Group One participant whose parents were deceased reported that while he was unable to complete his schooling, he “got as far as he did” in school due to the overwhelming support of the teachers and community workers he had known since Year 8:

The teachers helped because they knew I was on my own and let me go in the computer rooms whenever I want. I still talk to that main teacher on Facebook and he asks how I’m going. I could’ve finished Year 12, it was just hard learning how to manage paying bills and having my own place, I couldn’t concentrate hard enough to do the work …

This participant felt confident that he would still achieve his goals and was working on a plan to do so with the teacher he maintains contact with and a community worker that he has known all through high school. This finding lends support to Alloway and Dalley-Trim’s (2009) suggestion that the ability of young people to “succeed” in the current social climate will be
greatly affected by the vital roles played by those involved in their education and upbringing.

Overall, these findings suggest that the impact of residential mobility on young people's schooling engagement can be minimised when it is not coupled with a change in school.

Community context
Anderson, Sabatelli and Kosutic (2007) argue that young people's social circumstances are clearly enriched when they have strong attachments to broader social supports. Further, young people who successfully access external supports and community networks are more likely to develop pro-social behaviours and avoid risk behaviours (Anderson, Sabatelli & Kosutic 2007). The accounts of Group One participants confirmed Anderson, Sabatelli and Kosutic's (2007) contention that when community supports such as meaningful developmental programs, safe spaces or drop-in centres are absent, young people are denied access to high-quality mentoring and opportunities needed to develop pro-social skills and competencies:

I couldn't play club footy anymore and that sucked, plus I missed my PE teacher from Year 8. I know things would be different if I could've stayed there …

Significantly, Group Two participants all managed to join sporting groups and community volunteer groups with many of these affiliations enduring throughout high school and beyond. On the contrary, none of Group One was able to develop or maintain positive relationships with community members, coaches or mentors:

I really liked Year 8, I didn’t want to leave but my mum had to get away so I was probably a bit aggro with her for the first year or so. I couldn’t play club footy anymore and that sucked, plus I missed my PE teacher from Year 8. I know things would be different if I could’ve stayed there …

Conclusion
The authors acknowledge the need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from small sample sizes in pilot studies such as this, and recognise the benefit of including data from various socio-economic locations in future studies to enable a comparison of young people’s perceptions and experiences related to housing tenure, domestic contexts, school engagement and broader social attachments. That said, a number of key points can be drawn cautiously from this research and the literature at hand.

Emerging strongly from this research was the finding that housing tenure, familial dynamics and support, and school and community relationships can have a significant impact on young people’s schooling and community engagement. These themes and issues reflect the complex dynamics between physical resources (such as housing, neighbourhoods and schools), interpersonal relationships (with parents, siblings, peers and teachers) and young people’s identity work (that is, young people’s sense of “self”, incorporating a sense of belonging and purpose) in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances. Importantly, the results suggest that young people’s experiences of “home” during their high school years can have a profound effect on their identity work and can affect their post-school transitions.

Notably, housing tenure featured as a critical determinant of school engagement on two distinct levels. First, precarious or insecure housing contributed to a range of stressors that impacted on family functioning and parental support. Second, residential mobility, due to insecure housing, was implicated in the fracturing of social ties which left young people feeling isolated at school and without much sense of belonging, purpose or hope.

In sum, the foregoing points highlight the linkages between housing, ontological security and schooling by emphasising the interplay between a sense of constancy, a sense of belonging and a sense of self-worth. Moreover, these findings reinforce the importance of relationships to young people, and how housing can act as an “anchor” for young people’s relationships in and between domestic and social contexts.

The implications for social and educational policy are significant. Namely, these critical supports need to be addressed within policy settings that aim to facilitate greater school retention. In short, more holistic support is
required for young people (and their families) on the margins of Australian society to ensure that young people’s social contexts are able to provide them with the requisite support for their long-term and robust engagement with school and subsequent training/further study.

Notes
1. Australian Youth Allowance and the UK Employment Maintenance Allowance.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics census data from 2006 indicate that 75% of all renter households contained at least one person aged 15–24.
3. Readers are referred to the work of Giddens (1991) for greater explication of ontological security; and to Côté and Levine (2002) for further reading of concepts relating to identity work.

References
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