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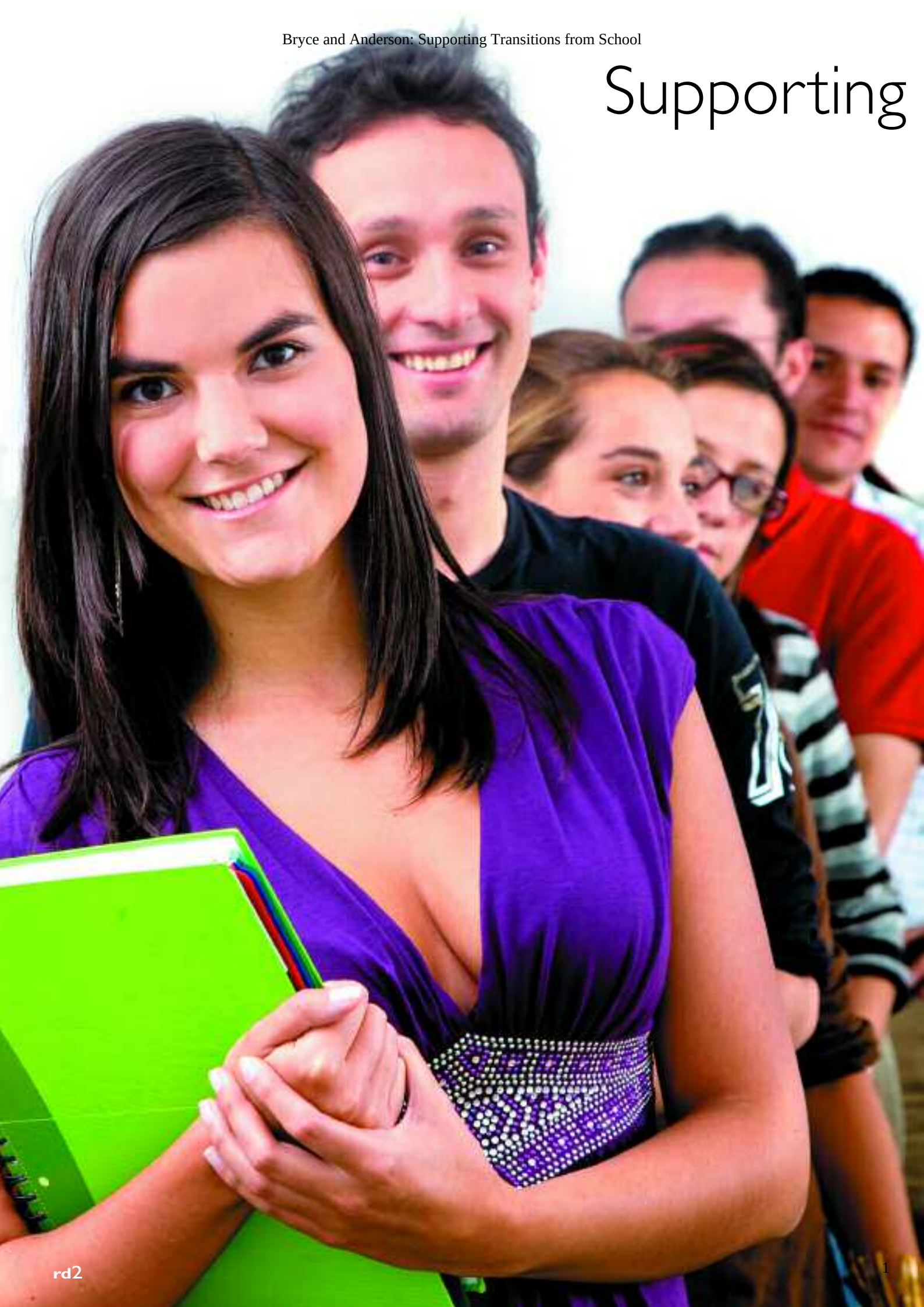

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transitions from school

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New research reveals ways of supporting students' transitions from school, as ***Jennifer Bryce*** *and* ***Michelle Anderson*** *explain.*

A new report, *Australian stories: Young people, their families and post-school plans*, building on research undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the Smith Family, examines the stories of a group of young people who have participated in the Smith Family Learning for Life scholarship program and who have made a positive start towards achieving their post-school goals. The research involved a series of in-depth interviews with nine young people (two males and seven females) and with nine family members (seven mothers, one father and one older sibling). By asking these young people questions about their decision-making, the barriers they faced and their strategies for overcoming these, the study suggests ways that young people in similar situations may be helped in making successful transitions from school.

There are complex choices and pathways potentially open to young people as they make their way from school to work or further education. In contemporary Australia the transition from school to post-school activities is not a simple, linear, 'one-off' process, and there are concerns about whether all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have the capacity, skills, knowledge and support to successfully navigate their way, and to avoid being in 'at risk' circumstances.

The choices and pathways available to young people today as they make their way from school to work or further education are many and varied. What was once seen to be a linear pathway is now often described as a mosaic, or 'crazy paving and stepping stones,' where students move in and out of education and different areas or types of employment (sometimes combining the two) and are more likely than previous generations to experience periods of part-time employment, casual work, unemployment and, for some young people, time outside the labour force and education altogether.

A significant proportion of disadvantaged young people fail to make a successful transition to work or further study. This has an adverse effect on individual lives, as well as on wider social and economic development. Supporting young people to make successful school to work transitions is important not just in economic terms but also for the human consequences associated with unsuccessful transitions.

Significant influences on young people's post-school planning, particularly when they weigh up the costs and benefits of pursuing university careers, include the young people's own perceptions of their abilities and interests. Family expectations are significant and often young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds give little

consideration to further education because it is not a part of their family's experience, but when such young people do pursue further education, assistance from a mentor is invaluable for both motivational influence and practical needs.

Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have a more instrumental view of education and may be more likely than their more comfortably off peers to have shorter-term goals in relation to pursuing further education. Financial assistance may play a less significant role than might be expected, and geographical distance and isolation appear to discourage university enrolment.

In examining the factors that appear to help young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds to make successful transitions from school to post-school options, the study found that while there was much mention of the assistance of financial support, such as scholarships from the Smith Family, financial support alone was not sufficient to help these young people to achieve their goals. Mentoring was very important, along with the support of significant teachers and friends, who complemented the support provided by families. In some cases such mentors could provide practical support that families were unable to access.

There were several main barriers encountered by young people undertaking transition from school to post-school options. There is little evidence of families in this study being able to work closely with schools to provide guidance for their children, and many families in this study had no familiarity with university environments. The array of tertiary courses was confusing and sometimes lacked meaning, and most of these young people had non-linear pathways – a kind of trial and error process – before discovering the courses they were pursuing at the time of interview for the research.

Further, young people sometimes suffered from what seemed to be a self-imposed pressure when they were in Year 12. Most families did not overtly pressure children to do well, but several young people interviewed had achieved well at secondary school, then 'ran amok' when faced with Year 12 exams.

While formal support networks such as schools and career guidance programs provide information to young people in their senior years at school, the informal support network that families provide is equally if not more important. This influence is apparent from the early years of secondary school.

Although parents are often motivated and well intentioned, they are not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children. Some parents report that they lack the tools and resources necessary to help students through the post-school planning process.

The majority of formal career guidance programs appear to focus on the provision of information to senior secondary students in isolation from their families and home experiences, but research suggests that young people need support with post-school planning from the early years of secondary schooling, if not before, and

that support must take into account the range of influences on students' career decision-making.

Policy and programs need to consider children and youth within the context of their families and communities in order to improve their post-school options. There is much research about the pathways that young people take but less understanding surrounds the processes by which they make these choices – yet, understanding these processes is fundamental to program and policy development that will enable all young people to make informed decisions about their futures.

This article draws on *Australian stories: Young people, their families and post-school plans*, a research report by Jennifer Bryce, Michelle Anderson, Tracey Frigo and Phillip McKenzie, and the research literature review by Tracey Frigo. The research was conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the Smith Family. All the young people's stories can be found in full within the research report. The research report and the literature review are available from the Smith Family website at *www.thesmithfamily.com.au*

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