

***Objective and Subjective Engagement with the Non-Local World  
by Rural School Leavers***

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## *Abstract*

### Aim

The aim of this study was to explore how senior students in a rural Australian high school made post year ten educational decisions, given they may have little access to knowledge concerning their future communities. Lack of access to information to inform these choices underscores the social and educational isolation of many of these students.

### Method

The study used both participant and non-participant observation in a school and its community. Thirty year ten students were included in the study (boys N=14; girls N=16) and these were categorized by social contact with the non-local world and their awareness of it. A social contact scale with the non-local world provided measures of the extent to which students had traveled beyond their community. The students' perceptions of the non-local world were also examined through their "contexts of awareness."

### Results

By bringing scale and awareness contexts together, three student "types" emerged. Type one students (N=12) were low in scale of social contact (defined within a radius of 160 - 240 Km from home) and low in the scope of their awareness contexts. Type two students (N=9) were low in scale of contact but high in terms of awareness contexts, while type three students (N=9) were high in both scale of contact and awareness of the non-local world. Eighty-six percent of boys in the study provided a match between their occupational aspirations and expectations. Only 38 % of girls' aspirations matched their expectations.

### Conclusion

The study revealed disparities within rural communities based on the nature and quality of contact with the non-local world. The study identified several implications for professionals and educational researchers around post-year ten decision-making. No evidence of ability differences between types 1, 2 and 3 students was found but the awareness contexts - the horizons students have both locally and beyond - needs to be closely examined in relation to post school educational and career decision-making.

### ***Objective and Subjective Engagement with the Non-Local World by Rural School Leavers***

It is almost three decades since the Schools Commission (1976) and the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia (1976; 1978) drew attention to the relatively low enrolment of rural students in higher education, followed by other studies of rural schooling (Boomer, 1987; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; McGaw et.al 1977; Turney et. al. 1980). All rural Australian students are isolated in geographic terms because of where their homes and the community schools they attend are located. However, some rural students appear to be more isolated than others. The extent of one's network of family, peers (Slocum, 1967; Stevens, 1998) and other contacts are important in deciding if and where one goes to school beyond the minimum leaving age.

#### ***Introduction***

For many rural school leavers in Australia migration to urban centres is necessary if further education and careers are to be pursued (Bell, 1987; Stoessiger, 1980a, 1980b). This dimension of rural education in Australia is well known, and has also featured in studies in Canada (Genge, 1996; Healey and Stevens, 2002; Tucker and Stevens, 1999) and the United States (Chenoweth and Galliher, 2004), but the educational and vocational implications of it are not always apparent. For some young rural school leavers the problem of what to do at the conclusion of compulsory education is confusing: where should they go to complete their secondary education? Which senior high school courses are required for enrolment in possible future higher education courses? For many rural students completing year ten (aged around fifteen years) there is doubt that they will be

able to compete with their urban counterparts who have been educated in much larger schools and who do not face the disruption of having to leave home to complete years eleven and twelve (aged around sixteen and seventeen). Beyond these immediate concerns, many young rural school leavers face the issue of making personal sense of the non-local world that has, in some cases, never been experienced (Stevens, 1988; Stewart, 2003).

The issue of some young rural people being more isolated from post-secondary school educational and career opportunities than others while living within the same community is not well-recognized in spite of the social and educational implications that it entails. A move from a rural to an urban community and school is not merely a physical change of location. It involves intellectual and emotional adjustments and rural school leavers can experience these in different ways. Young people within a rural Queensland community that was the focus of a small-scale study, outlined in the following section, experienced geographical isolation in different ways. Geography contributed to their social differentiation by influencing their objective and subjective engagement with the non-local world, thereby influencing post-secondary educational and vocational outcomes.

### ***Rural Australian Communities***

Two broad categories of rural schools can be identified in Australia. In the first category, rural schools in Tasmania, eastern New South Wales and Victoria can be considered to have some similarity in that none is far from a major centre of population. Rural schools

in these parts of Australia are not unlike their counterparts in New Zealand, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. They are often located in towns that are connected by good roads and rail to larger towns and cities. People in these small rural communities do not necessarily feel isolated because access to larger centres for shopping, entertainment, sports and educational and cultural opportunities is not difficult. The second category of rural Australian schools is characterized by extreme geographic isolation. Schools in most of Western Australia, Queensland, western New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory are often located far from major centres of population and also from one another. Schools in this category are sometimes referred to as “bush” or “outback” schools and are prominent in international perceptions of education in Australia, although most Australians are educated in urban communities. The Queensland school that is discussed below is in the second category of Australian schools.

There is an international policy issue in the provision of education in small schools in rural communities. In most societies, including Australia: it is too expensive to justify appointing full or even part-time teachers in specialized areas of the curriculum where there are very few students. Governments in Australia and other developed countries have often provided financial assistance for families of senior students in rural communities to enable them to complete their education in urban centres. Within some rural families, generations have been educated in boarding schools. Other rural students spend considerable amounts of time traveling from their homes in small communities to schools in larger centres, although this is not an option for the second category of Australian rural schools as the distances are too great. A variety of electronic ways of

providing education for the most isolated young rural Australians has included the School of the Air which has enabled many to receive instruction in their own communities from a central institution (Stevens, 1994). More recently e-learning has changed the nature of distance education for students in rural communities (Stevens, 2003). There have been many ways of providing education for rural Australian high school students and some of these have been innovative and have extended learning opportunities.

### *The Rural Queensland Study*

A study was undertaken to explore how young people leaving school in a rural community made their post year ten educational and career decisions. While education to year twelve is now locally available, at the time of the study, the most senior year of high school in the Queensland rural community was year ten. It was difficult to claim that rural students had educational opportunities equal to their urban counterparts when they could not undertake full high school courses in their own community.

At the conclusion of high school at year ten, the subjects of this study had to make decisions about what to do next. Enrolment in years eleven and twelve meant leaving home and resuming studies in a larger school in another place. Local employment opportunities were limited, particularly for girls, and traditional rural jobs such as jackaroos and jillaroos (male and female station hands respectively) were scarce. The transition from a small rural school to a larger urban institution was often complex,

particularly for families with little experience of life beyond rural Queensland. It is at this point that some young rural Australians feel particularly isolated.

The study began with a broad question, identified three decades earlier by the Schools' Commission (1976) and the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia (1976;1978) that young people in rural schools did not enter higher educational institutions in numbers proportionate to their urban counterparts. Partly on this basis, the Schools Commission identified rural schools in Australia as being educationally disadvantaged along with women, migrants and aborigines. The evidence for the claim that rural students were disadvantaged was acknowledged to be slight by the Schools' Commission and there was a call for research into the issue. This formed the basis for an exploratory study into the question of the nature of rural educational disadvantage in a small and isolated Queensland community.

It was possible to identify four distinct social groups in the Queensland community of 1,800 people, located in the central north of the state: the graziers, a small middle class of professionals and managers, the working class whose wages came mostly from jobs on the shire council or railway and the aborigines. In addition to these distinct groups, there was a small transient population of shearers and agricultural labourers. Each group had a different relationship with the community. Because of the size of their holdings, graziers almost always lived well beyond the town although some kept a second residence there in which their wives and school-age children lived during the week, returning to the station for weekends. Graziers were often prominent in civic affairs and many belonged to a

members-only club that was considered by most local people to be exclusive. Very few people in the professional-managerial group had children at the local high school. This group included bank managers, teachers, nurses and visiting medical people. Most were too young to have children of high school age and those that did usually left the community before their offspring were old enough to be enrolled. The third group – the rural working class - was most numerous in the local school while the fourth group, the aborigines, mostly lived on the edge of town and frequented their own church and pub. Unemployment was very high in the aboriginal sector of the community.

After spending some time in the rural community as a non-participant observer, the focus of the research emerged from an unlikely place – a petrol pump. The pump attendant said he wished that his daughter, currently a year ten student at the local school, could proceed to university, adding that this would not be possible for financial reasons. He earned too much in his current job to be eligible for full government assistance, but too little to be able to afford full secondary education elsewhere. The family was both too rich and too poor to be able to afford post-compulsory education, in this case, education beyond year ten. They were too rich to be eligible for full government subsidies and too poor to be able to afford the difference between a partial subsidy and the cost of full secondary education beyond the community. At the time of this conversation the writer had spent long enough in the Queensland community to realize that it was both socially and economically differentiated. The aborigines had their own government-funded pathways to further education, while graziers had long favoured boarding school education for their sons and daughters and most could, with the assistance of accountants, qualify for full



government subsidies. Almost all of the students in the Queensland school were in neither of these categories. They were not aborigines and they were not the sons and daughters of graziers. They were members of the majority group in this community – the rural working class, about whom little has been written. How rural working class students perceived the non-local world where post school educational and most career opportunities were located, depended on their knowledge of and contact with other places. It also depended to some extent on the financial resources of their families.

***Methods: Objective and Subjective Engagement with the Non-Local World***

The study used both participant and non-participant observation in the school and its community. Data were gathered by questionnaires and interviews with year ten students, their families, teachers, the principal, and selected members of the community (eg, priests and business people). Data were recorded in note form and then analyzed. A class of 30 year ten students was selected for study (boys N=14; girls N=16) and these were categorized according to their scale of social contact with the non-local world and their awareness of it. The scale of social contact with the non-local world provided an objective measure of the extent to which the 30 students had traveled beyond their community. Five dimensions were considered in classifying the scale of students: (i) Local: those who had never been beyond the local town and its environs (ii) NQ: those who had had contact with other towns in North Queensland; (iii) Qld: those who had traveled throughout the state of Queensland; (iv) Australia: those who had traveled to other parts of Australia and, (v) Australia+: those who had visited other countries.

Students were asked about the nature and extent of their contact with extended family, peers and significant others in each of these five dimensions in categorizing them. For example, a student whose extended family, peers and significant others were all in North Queensland was identified as belonging to the second category.

As well as considering students' scale of contact with the non-local world, their perceptions of it were also examined through their "contexts of awareness." As in the case of scale of social contact, students were classified as (i) Local, (ii) North Queensland, (iii) Queensland, (iv) Australia and (v) Australia +. Unlike the concept of scale, through which it is possible to consider objectively who a student has contact with, awareness contexts are subjective in that a student identified what information about the non-local world (in this case their educational and occupational possibilities) they had and the sources from which this was obtained. It was possible for a student to be low in scale of contact in that all his or her interactions were local, but high in awareness contexts because his or her understanding of the non-local world was extensive, coming from such non-local sources as newspapers, books, television and correspondence.

Those who were categorized as Local or NQ were classified as being low in terms of social contact while those who were in the other groups (Qld, Aust, Aust +) were considered to be high in terms of social contact. Because of the subjective nature of these judgements a colleague was asked to check the researcher's categories used in these classifications. After a detailed explanation of the study, the colleague independently

reached the same conclusions as the writer for all students in respect of both classifications (scale of social contact and scope of awareness contexts).

### *Analysis of Data*

By bringing scale and awareness contexts together, four student “types” emerged. Type one students (N=12) were low in scale of social contact (defined within a radius of 160 kilometres to 240 kilometres of their home) and low in the scope of their awareness contexts (Lc&La). Type two students (N=9) were low in scale of contact but high in terms of awareness contexts (Lc&Ha), while type three students (N=9) were high in both scale of contact and awareness of the non-local world (Hc&Ha). It was not surprising that there were no type four students (Hc&La). The educational experiences and the outcomes of the group of 30 Year 10 students that was studied differed according to their student ‘type’, based on their scale of social contact and their contexts of awareness of the non-local world. The existence of type two students inherently posed the question how young people who were low in terms of contact with the non-local world could have a high awareness of it?

The post year ten educational and vocational choices that were made by types one, two and three students differed from one other. Of the 12 Type One (Lc and La) students, two chose professional occupations, one chose a white-collar occupation, three chose blue-collar occupations, five chose routine/unskilled jobs and one was uncertain about what to choose. Two-thirds of Type One students chose occupations of an unskilled,

manual nature. Those Type One students who chose professional and white-collar occupations were all girls.

Most Type Two (Lc and Ha) students' career choices excluded routine/unskilled occupations. Over one-third both aspired to and expected to enter professional occupations. Of the nine Type Two students, four chose professional occupations, three chose white-collar occupations and two chose blue-collar occupations. Type Two girls' occupational choices were higher than those of Type Two boys; only one girl did not aspire to either a professional or a white-collar occupation.

The 9 Type Three (Hc and Ha) students' career choices covered a wider range than their Type Two counterparts. Three chose professional occupations, two chose white-collar occupations, three chose blue-collar occupations and one chose a routine/unskilled occupation. While Types Two and Three students differed from Type One students in that their overall career choices were either professional or white collar, Type One students (who were the most isolated in educational terms), made more limited career choices. Geographical isolation appeared to constrain the range and type of choices these students made.

### ***Results***

In this study an attempt was made to ascertain whether the students believed that the vocational choice they aspired to matched their expectations. Almost all the boys in the

study (86 per cent) provided a match between their occupational aspirations and expectations, but only 38 per cent of girls' aspirations matched their expectations. A partial explanation for this was reluctance on the part of many students, particularly those with least experience and knowledge of the non-rural world (Type One students), to leave the community. For some students, particularly those classified as Type One, any local job, even if it was unskilled and low-paid, was preferable to migrating to an urban centre in search of further education or a career. For girls, there were very limited local employment opportunities, which compounded the difficulty of the post Year 10 decision. Reluctance to leave familiar surroundings is at best a partial explanation for the mismatch between the girls' aspirations and expectations. The very fact of living in a town with a strict sexual division of labour in which paid work was mostly undertaken by men obviously interacted with isolation and had a compounding effect.

Students were influenced in making their post-secondary educational and career decisions in several ways: by their nuclear and extended families, by their local and non-local peers, by the school and by significant others. There were differences between types one, two and three students in terms of the influences on their post year ten decisions. Only one of the types one and two girls cited her father as an influence on her post year ten decision, while four out of five type three girls did so. All type one boys listed their father as an influence on the decision while type two girls were strongly influenced by their mothers. The school had very little influence on the post year ten decisions of type one boys, with only one citing this institution as an influence.

Compared to family and school influences, peers had a relatively small impact on students' post year ten decisions. Students were more influenced by local than non-local peers and were influenced only by peers of the same sex. Significant others influenced relatively few students. However, when present, the significant other influence was very strong because it came from people mostly in the chosen occupation of the student or from related media.

The educational aspirations (what students would like to do) and expectations (what students think they will do) about continuing school after year ten, were matched for 25 of the 30 students (83%) in this study. All type 1 students' aspirations and expectations were matched, but those for a third of the type 3 students did not do so. More girls both aspired to, and expected, a tertiary education than boys (56% of girls and 29% of boys). The occupational aspirations and expectations of students revealed a possible sex difference: whereas 86% of boys provided a match between their occupational aspirations and expectations, only 38% of girls provided such a match. In respect of the types 1 and 2 girls with a mismatch, the predominant trend was for expectations to be lower than aspirations. It appeared that for these students remaining in their rural community and doing any job was preferable to leaving and fulfilling their aspirations.

Eleven of the twelve type 1 students were able to identify their occupational expectations; 5 listed routine jobs, 3 blue collar, 1 white collar, and 2 professional occupations. This meant that 8 of the 11 students (73 %) listed occupations which are considered to be unskilled or manual skilled. Seven of the nine type 2 students were able to identify their

occupational expectations: 1 listed a routine occupation, 1 blue collar, 2 white collar, and 3 identified professional occupations. Five of the seven type two students (71 %) listed clerical, managerial or professional occupations. Finally, eight of the nine type 3 students were able to identify their occupational expectations; of these, 1 listed a routine job, 1 blue collar, 1 white collar, and 5 identified professional occupations. Six of eight type three students (75 %) listed clerical, managerial or professional occupations.

These results suggest that types 2 and 3 students can be distinguished from their type 1 peers in that they had expectations for employment generally considered to be higher in occupational status. It is difficult to distinguish clearly between types 2 and 3 students but it appeared that type 3 students had a greater orientation towards professional choices, although the numbers involved were too few to draw a firm conclusion.

### ***Implications for Rural Professionals***

It could be argued that the realization of career options is not a specifically rural problem although, unlike the subjects of this study, urban students usually have the option of years 11 and 12 in their own schools. More generally, Nash (1980) points out that rural education (and rural life):

...are to be understood as determined by the *relationships* (writer's emphasis) which exist between the urban centres and the rural areas.

Post secondary school educational and vocational choice has significance well beyond rural schools and their communities, affecting, ultimately, the demography of Australia. In those small rural schools that provide classroom instruction only to the minimum

leaving age, many families consider leaving their rural homes and lifestyles and relocating in cities or larger towns in the belief that their children will have more educational and vocational opportunities. Others choose boarding school education (Baker & Andrews 1991). There are demographic implications for the whole country in educational migration. There are also educational considerations in the issue of rural vocational choice: while most urban young people have the opportunity to see or perhaps experience the vocations that they are interested in, it can be difficult for rural students to relate to accountancy, law, computer programming and other largely urban occupations. Many rural young people, therefore, tend to make rather conservative career choices and this can be attributed to the nature of the objective and subjective environments, outlined above, in which choices are made. For a teacher to influence the vocational choice processes of rural school leavers, an understanding of the local culture is necessary.

A number of implications for rural professionals arise from this research: the provision of educational opportunities in rural communities; teaching in rural schools; vocational guidance and school travel. The provision of educational opportunities is a sensitive issue in rural communities. Many students and their families when interviewed during the Queensland study stated a belief that educational standards were lower in rural Australia than they were in other parts of the country, citing local students who had failed to complete senior courses at larger schools. The implications for rural out-migration and its attendant consequences are considerable (Golding, 2001). More rural families will relocate to larger towns or urban areas to enable their



children to obtain full secondary education unless educational opportunities are extended to include the local provision of full secondary education.

Teachers in rural schools have to satisfy local community needs as well as those of the state (Meyenn, et.al., 1991). An important aspect of this is the relationship of the teachers to the community: teachers need to be seen as important and valued members of the rural community in order to provide an effective link to the outside world. In this study, only the Deputy Principal and mathematics teacher had much influence on students' post year ten decisions. This may possibly be related to the youth and inexperience of the teachers in the Queensland study and their non-rural backgrounds (Stevens, 1992).

Vocational guidance emerged as a critical aspect of the lives of year ten students in this study. If, for example, young people need to leave their rural community to further their education, the fostering of confidence is an important component of the vocational guidance officer's role, as well as the development of student knowledge of urban life and non-local opportunities.

In this study it was found that some year ten students had never seen the sea or an elevator in a public building until a school trip to the coast enabled some of them to experience urban (and marine) life for the first time. Extensive and carefully programmed travel, including billeting with urban peers, would both increase the scale of students' contact with the non-rural world and increase the scope of their

awareness of other environments. Such trips should, ideally, include a wide range of experiences for rural students: educational, occupational and recreational.

### ***Research Problems Arising from this Study***

Several problems emerged from this small-scale study that would benefit from further research.

- Why do more girls aspire to, and expect to acquire, tertiary education than boys? Is this a general pattern or a chance effect for the particular group that was studied? If such a difference does exist, is it a reflection of the less defined aims of many rural girls at age 15 or 16 (compared to boys) brought about by perceived limited career opportunities for them in the local community? Do rural girls think more about the possibility of enrolling in tertiary education because they are unable to see a local future?
- Why was there a gender difference in the match between occupational aspirations and expectations? This study found that boys tended to expect the occupation to which they aspired, whereas girls, much more often, expected something less. This may be related to the previous question: the perceived lack of career opportunities for girls in rural areas may well shape a frame of mind which leads them to settle for something less than they would like. Girls, more so than boys, may face a career crisis in which they must choose

between the local community which they know (i.e. take any job) or take a career path which leads them into unknown territory and which may include the experience of tertiary education. Future research could investigate this hypothesis and whether particular services can be used (eg vocational guidance) to ease the stress that students must experience at this time.

- Do types 2 and 3 students generally have higher occupational aspirations and expectations than type 1 students? This finding needs both replication and further investigation.

The present study found no evidence of ability differences between types 1, 2 and 3 students, so ability as a mediating factor cannot be offered as an explanation. The concept of awareness contexts – the horizons students have both locally and beyond – needs to be studied more closely with reference to the everyday family and the community lives of rural children.

### *Conclusions*

- Post-school educational and career choices impact on rural students' life chances and thereby contribute to social differentiation in Australian society. The students who formed the majority group in this study were, in most cases, the sons and daughters of single income rural families, based largely on the earnings of fathers

who worked in manual occupations. In spite of their majority status in this study, this remains a largely hidden group in rural Australian education.

- A dominant theme in the organization of education in rural communities is equality of opportunity with schools in urban areas (Darnell, 1981) and the options that are provided for young people as they make the transition from school to further education or work (Abbott-Chapman & Patterson, 2001; Dunne, et.al. 1980; Henry, 1989; James et.al. 1999; Jarvis, 1990). The development of distance education in Australia, new technologies (Barker, 1988; D'Cruz, 1990) and the advent of the Internet and, with it, e-learning (Stevens, 2003) have all increased learning opportunities for rural students. The distance of rural youth from further education and career opportunities nevertheless remains an issue for teachers and schools (Dobson- Ingram, 1973; Stevens, 1998) and other rural professionals.

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