

## Vocational Choice for Senior High School Students in Rural Australian Communities

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*In many rural schools in Australia, students must make career decisions at an earlier stage than is necessary in urban areas because full high school education is not locally available. After year 10, students who have been reared and educated in the rural interior of the country must study independently, or migrate to urban centres, if they want to pursue their education. Their choice reflects fundamental social differences in rural communities. The significance of post-year-10 vocational choice is that it remains largely the invisible concern of the numerically important rural working class.*

For 2 decades, rural education has been identified as an area of disadvantage within Australian society (Karmel, 1973). This perception has guided federal government policy throughout the period (Australian Schools Commission, 1975). However, the identification of rural educational disadvantage and subsequent federal government policy directions were made on the basis of little research evidence, most of which concerned the low enrollment of rural high school students in colleges and universities relative to their urban counterparts.

Reports on rural schools within community settings are sparse, tend to be located in the south of the country (in the states of Victoria and New South Wales), and are dated (Campbell, 1962; Oeser & Emery, 1954; Radford, 1939). The present study was designed to investigate influences on the vocational choices of senior high school students in a rural community in the northwest interior of the state of Queensland. In many small communities in the interior of Australia, full high school education is not locally available. Usually formal education is provided in schools through year 10, which, at the time of this study, coincided with the minimum legal leaving age. To complete the remaining 2 years of high school education, it is necessary to study either by distance education or to migrate to a larger, usually urban, school in order to qualify to enter one of the country's universities.

### Methodology

The study began with a period of observation within the school of a rural community known by the pseudonym "Northtown", and it extended to as many aspects of family

and community life as possible. The researcher entered the local school as a teacher and researcher from the Faculty of Education of a Queensland university, which had a major role in the preparation of teachers for schools in the north and the interior of the state. It was explained to the community and school that little was known in the research literature about the educational experiences of students and teachers in small schools in North Queensland, and that it would be valuable for future teachers to have some insight into the day-to-day life of a typical school in this part of Australia.

The school in Northtown enrolled students from the ages of 5 to 15 (years 1 to 10); this study focused on the final 3 years (8 to 10)—the high school. After analysis of conversations, observed behaviour, classroom interaction and teacher's perceptions, it was discovered that post-year-10 vocational choice was a common and central issue facing students, families, teachers, and many sections of the community. As the central educational issue in this rural community, vocational choice became the focus of the research. Vocational choice was considered in terms of each student's objective and subjective perceptions of the non-local world.

### A Rural School Case Study in Queensland

#### *Education Options and Rural Community Groups*

The community of Northtown is small (population 1800) and socially differentiated. Northtown is over 900 kilometres from Brisbane, the state capital, and over 200 kilometres from the nearest settlement. Four Northtown groups were identified: the graziers who owned and operated sheep and cattle stations; professional people and white collar workers; manual/blue collar workers; and aboriginal (indigenous) Australians. Each of these groups had a different relationship with the town and with the local school.

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No graziers actually lived in Northtown because most sheep and cattle properties were so large—100,00 acres—that the students who lived upon them were well beyond daily commuting distance of the school. Accordingly, most children from this sector of the Northtown community received their primary (elementary) education by distance education in their homes before entering urban boarding schools at the high school level. (A few graziers maintained houses in the town in which their wives and children lived between Mondays and Fridays to enable children to attend Northtown school on a daily basis). Within the Northtown community, graziers exerted considerable influence on civic life, even though most only visited the town to use its services.

The second group, the professionals and white collar workers, was tiny and, in educational terms, almost non-existent. Doctors and accountants only visited Northtown occasionally. Teachers in Northtown were too young to have families of high school age, as were employees of the local bank.

Groups 1 and 2—effectively, the rural middle class—did not face the issue of post-year-10 vocational choice directly because they did not send their children to the local school. The tiny professional and white collar group left Northtown before their children were of high school age. Graziers traditionally favoured boarding-school education for their children, which resulted in their offspring being sent away to either larger towns or to cities where they were educated alongside their urban peers.

To qualify for a full boarding-school allowance from the government, students and their families had to prove that they could not receive adequate education locally and that the family's income was low. Graziers, while considered here as a separate social category, were middle class in terms of their education and the managerial aspect of their occupation, but they claimed to have low incomes and pointed out that there were no boarding facilities at the Northtown school. Accordingly, they usually qualified for full boarding-school allowances from the government, and their sons and daughters were rarely educated in the local school.

Most high school students in Northtown were from the third and fourth groups: the wage earning working class and the local Aboriginal community (most of whom were unemployed). Almost all the students in the Northtown school were the sons and daughters of the rural working class, who made their livings from labouring on the shire council roads or in semi-skilled jobs with the railway. Most of this group did not qualify for full government boarding-school subsidies, which would have facilitated enrollment in year-11 and 12 classes in schools in larger centres.

Because the incomes of the fathers of the working class year-10 students in Northtown were, in almost all cases, slightly above the amount needed to qualify for full board-

ing school subsidies, these families were eligible for only half boarding school fees from the government. Rural working class families therefore had to meet half the cost of boarding school fees from modest incomes, which made enrollment in years 11 and 12 for most families with more than one child financially impossible. With little local employment available, particularly for girls, and few opportunities for mothers to earn additional family income locally, rural working class resentment of the government's treatment of the graziers (whose accountants verified that sheep and cattle stations' incomes were low enough to qualify for full boarding school allowances) and of the aboriginal people (who received particularly generous post-year-10 funding) was a source of intra-community tension.

The Aboriginal people's separate, government-funded scheme covered all educational expenses in boarding schools, including travel and all away-from-home living allowances. Aboriginal people received by far the most generous and comprehensive assistance of all groups in rural Australia in the provision of post-year-10 education, and this was frequently commented on by members of each of the other three groups in Northtown. Many aboriginal people, however, chose not to continue their education beyond year 10.

In the Northtown community, most of the high school students were from non-aboriginal, working class homes that were effectively excluded from continuing their high school educations in other centres for financial reasons, a matter that was determined largely by government funding of boarding school places. Although distance education was made available for years 11 and 12 in Northtown, supervision at this level was difficult for the school to organise within its timetable and students were largely expected to work independently on correspondence lessons supplemented by radio broadcasts from Brisbane, the state capital.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Vocational Choice and Differing Rural Perceptions of the Non-Local World*

Since the local high school did not serve all sectors of Northtown, this study was largely about rural working class students in a socially diverse community. These students differed from their rural middle class peers not only in terms of education options, but also in terms of their familiarity with urban Australia, a difference that further complicated the matter of vocational choice.

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<sup>1</sup>Australia has invested heavily in communication technologies for education in remote communities (D'Cruz, 1990), and the possibilities of new, interactive forms of distance education for improving education for students in isolated communities like Northtown are promising.

The few students from grazier homes who attended Northtown school had travelled widely within the state of Queensland and, in some cases, throughout Australia, in the family's aircraft. Because most of the sheep and cattle properties in this part of Australia are so large, aircraft are essential for their management; they also provided the means for interstate travel. Most of the children from the grazier or middle-class sector of rural society had, accordingly, travelled widely within Australia. In many of the rural working class homes, however, few young people or their families had ever travelled beyond the state of Queensland, and most had not visited the state capital, Brisbane. Almost none had travelled to other states, and few had any familiarity with urban life at all. On a Northtown school trip to the coast, the author discovered that many year-10 students from working class homes had never seen the sea, nor had they ever been on a boat or ridden on an elevator. The concept of urban life seemed unnatural and, to some, claustrophobic. Aspects of urban dress were found interesting (particularly suits and neckties), while the density of traffic and its negotiation was new as was the noise of the city. After a few days, initial excitement waned and most looked forward to returning to reality, in rural Northtown.

To obtain both objective and subjective dimensions of the post-year-10 vocational decision, 30 year-10 students were considered in terms of their actual contact with the non-local world together with their awareness of it. Each student was categorised according to his or her physical contact with the non-rural world: the local area within a 100-mile radius, North Queensland, Queensland, other states of Australia, and overseas contact. Those whom were considered low in scale of contact had had interaction with only the local area and with north Queensland. Students who had interacted with the rest of the state of Queensland, other states of Australia, and had travelled overseas were classified as high in scale of contact.

The students were subsequently considered in terms of their awareness of the non-rural world through knowledge of urban, national, and international life, mediated through the school, the media, and their peers. The same dimensions were used for classifying students in terms of their awareness of the non-local world. Those students who had low awareness of the non-local world had awareness of only the local area and of north Queensland; awareness of other areas (Queensland, other states of Australia and overseas) was classified as having high awareness. These objective and subjective dimensions of being a rural person (scale of contact and awareness of the non-local world) were combined to produce student "types".

Type 1 students (N = 12) were low both in their scale of contact and in their awareness of non-local environments (Lc and La). Type 2 students (N = 9) were low in the scale of their contact, but high in awareness of other environ-

ments (Lc and Ha). Finally, Type 3 students (N = 9) were high in terms of both the scale of their contact with the non-local world and their awareness of it (Hc and Ha).

Two thirds of Type 1 students chose occupations of an unskilled, manual nature. Type 2 students' career choices excluded routine/unskilled occupations; over one third expected to enter professional occupations, and another third chose white collar occupations. Type 3 students' career choices covered a wider range than their Type 2 counterparts and little pattern can be seen in their decisions. Three students chose professional occupations, two chose white collar jobs, three opted for blue collar positions, and one decided to seek work that could be classified as routine or unskilled.

Types 2 and 3 students differed from Type 1 students in that their overall career choices were generally higher (i.e., they were either professional or white collar).

Type 1 students were more isolated than Type 2 and 3 students in educational terms and, accordingly, made their career choices within a more limited range of careers. Almost all students in this study were from rural working class homes, and the differences in their post-year-10 vocational choices could be attributed largely to their knowledge and experience of the non-local world.

In the study, students' vocational aspirations were matched with their expectations. Almost all of the boys (86%) were able to match their aspirations with their expectations, while only 38% of the girls could do so. For many students, there was pronounced reluctance to leave their familiar rural environment, particularly by those with the least experience of the non-rural world. For many Type 1 students, accepting any local job, regardless of how menial it may be, was preferable to having to leave home to search for other opportunities. For Type 1 girls, this presented particular difficulties because of the paucity of local employment. Sher and Sher (1994) have noted the central importance of the school in the development of rural Australia:

the prospects for rural development, and, thus, the prospects for a better future for Australia's rural people and places, are remarkably dependent upon a broad range of appropriate educational options and activities. (p. 37)

For many of the senior high school students in this study, particularly Type 1 students, few vocational options were able to be perceived.

#### *Year-10 Students and the Dilemma of Vocational Decisions*

The year-10 rural students faced a range of dilemmas in considering their post-year-10 educational and vocational

futures in urban locations, something that was not recognised by the Queensland Department of Education or by the school. Very young and inexperienced teachers did not have the resources to provide vocational guidance or advice about how to find ways of obtaining year 11 and 12 education in other places. No teachers in the Northtown school had received any training in distance education teaching, and the provision of this form of education for years 11 and 12 was considered to be the responsibility of unknown teachers in Brisbane. Therefore, rural working class students had to make vocational choices about unfamiliar environments with little direct assistance from teachers or other professionals, other than from three brief visits from a travelling vocational guidance officer during the year.

The year-10 students who had to make their vocational choices at the end of the school year faced conflicting social and cultural pressures. How would they cope with an urban environment? Would their rural educations be adequate in an urban school? In which year-11 and 12 courses should they enroll in a city school, assuming their families could find the necessary money to enable them to do so? Which year-11 and 12 courses were prerequisites for particular occupations? Was the local distance education alternative to enrolling in an urban school worth considering? Finally, was rural life really inferior to urban ways of living and therefore worth the upheaval and expense for their families of migration to a city?

The critical feature of vocational choice in many rural schools in Australia is that career decisions have to be made at an earlier stage than is necessary in urban parts of the country (where full high school education is locally available). Young people and their families have to decide at least 2 years earlier than their urban counterparts what urban school is to be attended, what courses are to be attempted there. For all families, an understanding of the vocational implications of their choices becomes important.

The relationship between school and work is not always clear to Australian families (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982). But for rural people who are unfamiliar with urban lifestyles, higher education, and the changing labour market, the post-year-10 decision can be a source of considerable anxiety as urban and rural lifestyles and life chances are evaluated. The matter is exacerbated by the lack of vocational opportunity in most rural Australian communities.

#### Conclusion

Vocational choice was an important consideration in rural working and middle class (grazier) relations, in rural teacher-student relations, and in ethnic relationships (because of white working class people's resentment of Ab-

original post-year-10 educational funding). However, the most significant aspect of vocational choice for senior high school students in rural Australia is that it remains largely the concern of the numerically important working class. Although several researchers have drawn attention to this matter (Henry, 1994; McGaw, Warry, Varley, & Alcorn, 1977; Stevens, 1994), it is largely untouched in educational research.

Rural culture and rural class culture, in particular, is not recognised in Australian educational policy. Government policy did not recognise educational differences in a community in which it had provided a school that enabled students to be taught only to year 10. Successive state and federal governments in Australia have attended to a loud message that financial support for full high school education in urban boarding schools is both educationally desirable and necessary, and failed to hear a much less audible message that full local high school education is wanted by many people who live and work in the small towns throughout the interior of the country. As a result, the critical final 2 years (eleven and twelve) are, in reality, only available to some sectors of the community.

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