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TITLE:   THE SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT IN RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA - BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL ISOLATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT: Students in rural schools in some areas of Western Australia face the difficulty of making further education and career choices at earlier ages than their urban counterparts. In these cases full secondary education is not locally available and students and their parents are faced with the problem of making difficult vocational decisions, often on the basis of little information. This paper examines some of the influences on year ten students in a rural Western Australian school as they consider their career options and suggests ways in which they can possibly be assisted through the application of new communication technologies.

INTRODUCTION

According to the political pundits in the past two decades Australia has been in a period of economic decline from having one of the highest standards in the world to closer to the bottom. Contributing to this fact has been the steady erosion of our status as a leading export nation. Of
particular educational, as well as economic, significance is the fact that
the days are gone when school leavers could have some guarantee of a job -
without necessarily undertaking further study or even completing Year 12.
Unemployment statistics are a stark reminder of the current recession in
Western Australia. The unemployment rate constantly exceeds 10% - youth
unemployment a staggering 3 times that! The number of young people
unemployed in Western Australia recently reached 16,700. This figure is
made all the more significant when school retention rates are noted. In
Western Australia school retention rates to Year 12 are close to 65%
compared to 35% about 10 years ago.

At the end of 1992 just over 17,000 students completed Year 12.
Approximately 6,000 or 35% went on to university study and almost 5,000
enrolled in technical and further education courses.

Against this backdrop are the corresponding figures of some 6,000 Year 12
school leavers who did not immediately undertake further education or some
form of training and a larger number, 6,500, who chose to leave school
rather than go on to complete Year 12. This situation occurred in spite of
the discouraging employment prospects.

In this continuing period of economic decline clearly education is
implicated as we are chastised and challenged to become the 'clever'
country. No longer we are told, can we simply expect to reap the harvest
from our previously tried and now tired approaches, we must also become the
'scientific' country. Moreover we are advised to look at the role of
education as part of the intricate mesh of social provision bound up in the
economic recovery that is required.

If we turn our attention within education we find the imbalance of
advantage and disadvantage becomes apparent between urban and rural
schooling. Indeed locational status is a guide to educational expectations
and vocational choice with rural students most likely to later experience
the harsher side of the reality of the nation's economic crisis.

Many factors may be raised into vast relief to analyse the components of
the rural social context which may compelling influence students
educational expectations. Such factors as family income, parental know-how,
and aspirations, community lifestyle and values, peer groups and other
personal associations, and educational facilities including people
resources available to students and a handful or more of related elements.
The social concomitants of factors result in the disadvantage of
underachievement for many rural students who face further economic risk
than their urban counterparts with reduced employment prospects and
decreased participation in training and higher education.

This factor was made overtly clear in the Report of the Education Council
Review Committee which states "Young people from rural areas participate in
post-compulsory schooling and higher education to a lesser extent that
their peers from urban locations". (Finn, 1991). This is a critical
observation, notwithstanding the fact that it essentially echoes a much earlier report (Karmel 1973). However today, few will deny that the rural sector is experiencing a period approaching a 'crisis' to use a much beleaguered term from the popular media. Thus more focussed attention to the plight of rural communities and rural schooling has brought the issues into the public spotlight. Reduced career opportunities for young people, particularly young people without post-secondary educational qualifications together with high unemployment is reinforcing the need to reassess educational processes.

A report by Boomer (1987) examined a wide range of research on rural Australian education. Significantly this report also highlighted the fact that students from rural communities did not enter universities in numbers proportionate to students from urban schools, they had reduced choices in curriculum and they were unsettled by a popular and widespread belief that education in remote communities was considered to be inferior to that in urban areas. It was against this backdrop that the present study was conceived.

GEOGRAPHIC AND EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES ON THE VOCATIONAL CHOICES OF STUDENTS

This study was undertaken in a small rural community in Western Australia which is referred to by the pseudonym "Westarup". Westarup was chosen for a variety of reasons: its isolation, the fact that it does not provide full secondary education to years eleven and twelve and its proximity to larger centres.

Westarup is situated approximately three hundred kilometres from Perth within a predominantly rural area of Western Australia. At the present time it is experiencing a period of uncertainty as a result of the recession and the rural economic downturn. The population is approximately 500 (1986 census) which are mainly in the 0-14 and 30-49 age groups. Agriculture and related services is the basis of employment (63%) and besides this the major industries are wholesale, retail and community services.

There is one secondary school in the community and students pursuing TEE subjects must leave the district. Most go to boarding schools in one of the larger coastal centres.

Methodology

The vehicle for data collection was a structured interview which contained a series of questions under the following headings.

1. The immediate future

2. School subject choices
3. Teachers
4. School
5. Home
6. Extended family

The subjects interviewed were all the year ten students at Westarup District High School in 1992 (N=24: girls=11; Boys=13). In organising the interview schedule the following procedures were implemented: One of the researchers contacted the Principal of Westarup District High School and provided written details of the project and requested permission to effect the research with the students. The Principal sent a letter to all parents of year ten students informing them of the study. Twenty four (24) gave permission for the children to be interviewed (one did not consent and one was absent when the interviews were conducted). The 24 students were interviewed separately for about one hour in May, towards the end of term one, 1992.

Career Choice in Rural Western Australia
Students were asked about their immediate future plans, that is, what they intended to do at the completion of year twelve. The study considered this in two dimensions: what students aspired to and what they expected to actually happen. In considering their career choices, aspirations were considered in relation to expectations. The second dimension of career choice was to consider the mediating variables of family and school in the lives of the 24 students in relation to their career choices.

Educational Aspirations and Expectations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirations</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Continue at school to year 12: N=22</td>
<td>Continue to year 12: N=22</td>
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Career Aspirations and Expectations
<table>
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<th>Aspirations</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Art career</td>
<td>Art career</td>
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<td>2. Agriculture</td>
<td>A job with animals</td>
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<td>3. Work with children</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>4. Teacher</td>
<td>Pre school teacher</td>
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<td>5. Graphic design</td>
<td>Graphic design</td>
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<td>6. Lab assistant</td>
<td>Lab assistant</td>
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<td>7. Theatre design</td>
<td>Don't know/not sure</td>
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<td>8. Travel agent</td>
<td>Not sure/any work</td>
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<td>9. Social work</td>
<td>Job helping people</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Work with children</td>
<td>Teacher (pre school)</td>
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<td>11. Army</td>
<td>Farmwork</td>
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<td>12. Farmwork</td>
<td>Welder or a trade</td>
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<td>13. Veterinarian</td>
<td>Assisting with animals</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Pilot</td>
<td>Any job</td>
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<td>15. Science (mining industry)</td>
<td>Science (mining industry)</td>
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<td>16. Lawyer</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>17. Farming</td>
<td>TAFE valuation course</td>
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<td>18. Pilot</td>
<td>Architect</td>
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Almost all students indicated that they intended to complete their secondary education to year twelve in spite of the fact that this would mean doing so in a school in a larger community. This contrasts with an earlier study in Queensland (Stevens 1988) in which only 11 out of a sample of 30 year ten rural school leavers indicated that they intended to continue their formal education beyond the minimum leaving age. It is likely that reduced career opportunities for young people without full secondary education together with high unemployment have influenced these educational decisions.

There is a remarkable lack of correlation between career aspirations and expectations in this study. Fifteen of the twenty four respondents indicated that they did not expect to realise their career aspirations. The interview considered two aspects of the students environments in seeking to explain this: family and education (school, including teachers).

Influences on Career Decisions
Family Influences

Family influences on students' career decisions were considered in two dimensions: nuclear and extended. Dominant nuclear family influences included:

(a) For Girls: (N=11): Most girls indicated that their mother was the person with whom they talked over their career plans (N=9) although four indicated that they also discussed the matter with both parents. Five girls never raised the matter of their vocational futures with their fathers and only one said that her father was the family member with whom she discussed such things. In only one case was a sibling (a brother) mentioned as being part of this discussion. This finding replicates earlier work in Queensland in a rural community (Stevens, 1988).

(b) For Boys: (N=13): Whereas for girls, mothers were found to be the major influence within the home, most boys (N=7) said that both of their parents were consulted. (In three cases this involved absentee fathers who were only seen at weekends). Four respondents said that their fathers were more important to them in their career discussion in the home than their mothers.

Overall, mothers were the most important influence on the career choices within these student's homes. It is notable that siblings appear to play little part in such family discussions.
Students were also asked about the influence of the extended families on their career decisions. The extended family includes uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins, some of whom lived in the local area and others lived in distant places. The influence of students' extended families were considered according to the following locations: (a) local area (Westarup), (b) Perth, (c) Other Western Australian centres, (d) other states of Australia, (e) Overseas. Students discussed their career options with their extended families according to these locations as follows:

(a) For girls:
Discussion with grandparents: (a)=1 (b)=3 (c)=1 (d)=1 (e)=0
Discussion with aunts/uncles: (a)=2 (b)=3 (c)=7 (d)=3 (e)=0
Discussion with cousins: (a)=0 (b)=0 (c)=4 (d)=1 (e)=0

Two girls indicated that they had no contact with any members of their extended families.

(b) For boys:
Discussion with grandparents: (a)=2 (b)=7 (c)=0 (d)=1 (e)=2
Discussion with aunts/uncles: (a)=0 (b)=5 (c)=5 (d)=1 (e)=0
Discussion with cousins: (a)=0 (b)=2 (c)=4 (d)=0 (e)=0

The main influence from these students' extended families was from beyond the local area. If the above influences are considered in terms of the numbers of responses (indicating some influence), for girls uncles and aunts were the most influential, particularly those who lived in other places in the same state but not in Perth. Discussion with cousins in these centres also appears to be influential.

For boys the main influences from members of their extended families came from Perth, particularly from grandparents who live there and from uncles and aunts in the state capital. Boys and girls appear to be more or less equally influenced by their cousins.

Overall, the main influences on these students career choices from their extended families has come from aunts and uncles followed by grandparents. Two respondents indicated influence from grandparents who lived overseas, otherwise most of the influence on career choices from members of these students' extended families appears to come from within Western Australia, rather than from other parts of the country.

Educational Influences
The school's influence on students' career decisions was also considered in two dimensions. The local dimension was the influence of the school itself which is an integral part of any community and the non local influence was considered in terms of the teachers who are all brought into the community to teach. Teachers are non local in the sense that they do not necessarily teach on the basis of local knowledge and in remote communities there is an implicit understanding that such people mediate the non local, usually urban, world to their rural students.

The influence of the school was considered in terms of attitudes that students expressed to it and how they felt about the prospect of leaving at the end of this year. Students were also asked to reflect on the advantages and the disadvantages of being educated in a small rural school from their experience in Westarup.

(a) For girls: Positive attitudes to Westarup school were expressed by just over half of the girls in the study (N=6) while five expressed negative attitudes to the school. Those who were positive about their rural school experience emphasised the attention they received from teachers and the fact that teachers were friendly. However, nearly half of the girls expressed negative attitudes to the school and pointed out that the school was "not competitive" and that this was not a good background from which to enter a city school. It was also pointed out that there were few subjects from which to choose in the curriculum and that the school organised few excursions. A major disadvantage that was pointed out by some girls in the study was the lack of local jobs and the fact that it was necessary to leave their community to obtain employment. In some cases this was expressed as the school being "too far away" from jobs.

(b) For boys: The experience of the boys in this small rural school appears to differ from that of the girls. Of the 13 boys in the study, 11 indicated that they were very satisfied with the school and expressed positive attitudes while only 2 were negative about their rural education. Boys emphasised the positive features of the school such as the friendliness of the teachers and the community and the good sporting facilities; the only negative comments that were expressed were that the school curriculum was not extensive and that being educated in this small rural school was not a good "training" for later life in a city.

Girls were much less enthusiastic about their rural education than the boys and expressed more negative feelings about the experience. Girls emphasised the lack of local jobs to a much greater extent than their male counterparts and, as they face the move to a city school next year, appear to be more apprehensive about the adequacy of their rural preparation.

Students were asked about their teachers to ascertain attitudes to a non local dimension of education. Rural teachers, even if they are locally born and bred, have had extended urban experience through their professional education and could be expected to mediate this to young people as they
prepare to leave this small rural community. Students were asked how much
influence teachers had had on their career decisions.

Of the 11 girls in the study, 5 indicated that teachers were not consulted
in any way about their futures, 3 discussed their plans with an English
teacher and 3 went to see the teacher in charge of careers within the
school.

Boys indicated more influence on their career decisions from teachers in
that 7 discussed their vocational futures with either a teacher or the
careers teacher in the school while 6 indicated that teachers played no
part in this aspect of their lives.

In this small rural school it appears that teachers do not exert much
influence on the career thinking of these year ten students and that the
influence, such as it is, is stronger on boys than on girls. This is a
matter that will require closer investigation before it can be explained.

Discussion of Research Findings
This is a small study conducted in one rural school in Western Australia
and the above results should therefore be treated with some caution. The
main influence on career choices have come from members of the students'
nuclear families, particularly from mothers. Teachers have had little
influence on this important aspect of students' lives and girls expressed
more negative attitudes towards their rural school experience than did the
boys in this study. It is not clear why the school and the teachers have
exerted so little influence on these young people as they make their career
choices although almost all of this year ten class intends to go on to
complete their secondary education.

This study clearly indicates that family rather than educational influences
are behind these year ten student's career plans. The question that has to
be asked is not why this is the case but why is the family's influence so
much stronger than that of the school and its teachers? The matter of
career choice is a significant issue in a student's life, yet in spite of
the positive feelings that have been expressed in relation to this small
Western Australian school it appears that its influence in this aspect of
young people's lives is not strong. It is difficult to explain why teacher
influence is stronger for boys than for girls.

There are several educational implications of this study for rural
communities like Westarup. A large proportion of the girls in the study
expressed negative attitudes to their rural educational experience and
complained about the lack of curriculum options open to them. Perhaps this
is one area for potential redress considering recent developments in
communication technologies that exist in rural Australian schools (Barker
1988; Booker 1987; D'Cruz 1990; Fasano et al 1987) which have the promise
of considerably extending the rural school curriculum. Earlier work has
indicated the importance of the transition of school to work in rural
Australia (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976; Schools Commission, 1975; McGaw et al 1977; Turney et al 1980) and overseas studies have supported this (Edmonds and Sheppard 1979; Peach 1970; Macaskill 1991; Stevens 1990).

At this point it might be appropriate to reproduce some of the discussion points outlined in a recent paper (Stevens and Mason 1993) prepared for the Annual Conference of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia "Schooling Through Distance Education: Towards 2000".

Communication Technologies in Rural Schools

Vocational choice has for a long time been a problem for rural senior secondary school students (Stevens, 1988; Stevens and Mason, 1992) and this has been a common reason for rural-urban migration. Not many teachers have skills in the provision of vocational advice or in assisting young people's transition from school to work. Advances in communication technologies can assist young rural people and their families to obtain up to date information about non local careers and to make decisions about them. One way in which this could happen is through peer interaction during tele-tutorials. Our 1992 study found that teachers played little part in the vocational choice processes of students leaving year ten and the reasons for this are not clear. It is possible that by enabling young people and their families to access various kinds of vocational information not locally available, teachers could in future play a more prominent role in this important dimension of rural secondary school education.

Rural communities in many parts of Australia have for decades suffered out-migration and the consequences of declining services and morale. When the local school is perceived to be inferior to schools in other places by a rural community, people will consider migrating for the sake of their children's education. If, however, students in rural classrooms are seen to be receiving the same lessons as students in urban classrooms, at the same time, and, through new interactive videos and whiteboards, receiving answers to their questions and assistance with their learning problems in the same way as young people in urban schools, many families may consider the costly move to relocate in an urban area.

Rural educators are now in a position, through recent advances, to re-assess the way that the curriculum is delivered in small and remote schools. Technology will never replace the teacher in any classroom, but with careful planning and judicious use, it can provide a way of enhancing rural education. Above all, new communication technologies provide rural educators with the means to reduce the educational isolation of young people in remote areas.

We drew together our discussion by suggesting that rural educationalists, in particular, have a role to play in the transition of rural economies to what is now known as the "information age". It has been pointed out that
the application of new communication technologies is likely to become a central feature of teaching in rural communities (D'Cruz, 1990; Stevens and Mason, 1992) and one in which Australian rural school teachers will, increasingly, acquire specialised expertise (Stevens, 1991c; 1992b). It is not yet widely recognised however, that teachers in rural schools are likely to play important roles in the economic development of rural economies.

References


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