

Possible Me? Disrupting ideas about future work for middle years primary students in the transitioning region of Latrobe Valley, Victoria.

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In 2017 the Latrobe Valley region of Gippsland was thrust into a transitional phase supported by government funding through the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) following the decommissioning of the coal-fired Hazelwood Power Station. After a century of coal-mining the Latrobe Valley, a bioregion with a population of approximately 76,000 people, faces an uncertain future without the financial and intergenerational job security of the energy sector. This changing and perplexing narrative is not lost on the region's younger generations, many of whom have grown up with aspirations about a future involving following in the footsteps of family in coal-related trades-based employment. Educational attainment rates in the region, which is characterised by low SES and high unemployment rates, show lower completion of post-high school studies than the rest of the State. This phased research project is conducted in partnership with the LVA, examining the aspirations of young people, opportunities for experience with the world of work, and future work in the region with a focus on three stages of learning; early years, primary and secondary schooling. The research is considered critical to re-position young people in a disadvantaged region, and has a sense of urgency attached to examining concepts such as disrupting traditional ideas about work, strengthening 'funds of knowledge', countering deficit thinking and supporting opportunities for new thinking about 'possible me's' at the local level. This paper presents the initial findings for research conducted with Years 5 and 6 students from Latrobe Valley primary schools who attended a day at the university campus designed to raise their awareness of possible future work opportunities achievable locally. The research draws on theories of rural social space and self-determination to contextualise the findings and provide a framework for understanding the agentic thinking of young people. Preliminary data suggests that primary students respond positively to new possibilities when thinking about future work and how to achieve this, have views on the impact of work on families and their community and could articulate the purpose of school as a pathway to future work. Positioned in the broader field of studies into youth aspirations in rural and regional places, the research highlights the possibilities for disrupting thinking about future work at a much earlier age than is currently the focus of school programs, suggesting an initiative that provides a way forward for local school-industry-university partnerships.