

POST GRADE 10 RETENTION - THE HUMAN ANGLE

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Retention is a subject which has been increasingly dissected from the statistical point of view, however in this article I want to study the subject with the human angle very much to the fore. In order to do this I want to introduce you to Charlie, who at the time the photograph was taken was a 22 year old F - 111 pilot with the RAAF. While a 22 year old in charge of a multi million dollar weapon system capable of 2900 km/hr is extraordinary in itself, what is even more striking is the fact that Charlie was born and bred in Tarraleah, a Hydro Electric Commission Village overlooking the valley of the Nive River in Tasmania's central highlands.

Charlie dreamed of flying from an early age and the story of his achievement in fulfilling this dream provides an insight into some of the basic factors and influences related to the discussion of retention. It is a story that highlights the personal element so important in any debate about education, but which can be easily swamped by a deluge of statistical analysis. We can use Charlie's story to help identify those factors that not only presented a **barrier** to his achievement, but also those which helped **break** the cycle of isolation that has exerted so much influence on Tasmania's social history (see Figure 1)

Tarraleah is the oldest of the Hydro Electric Commission villages in Tasmania and was established in the early 1930's for the construction of the Nive River, and later the Tungatinah power schemes. While it is now only one and a half hours drive from Hobart, it has a tradition of isolation arising from poor access up the original Victoria Valley road and the daunting conditions of winter, with mud, snow, ice and heavy rainfall making daily life a difficult, if not challenging experience.

Tarraleah is characterized by many of the traditional factors of isolation with which we are familiar and a brief review of these as they relate to this particular community would be useful in identifying the range of barriers presented to Charlie's ambition.

For this community, distance is a meaningless indicator of the degree of isolation. Of more value is the concept of **resistance**, reflected in the cost, time and effort required in maintaining contact with other communities, particularly Hobart. This is partly a consequence of the **climatic extremes** and **rugged terrain** which in the past made transport extremely difficult and which during winter still make travel dangerous, tiring and time consuming.

While a significant core of the population has shown a high degree of stability, the remaining population has been **transient**, with a high degree of turnover. While this has the potential to bring in new ideas on a regular basis, two negative effects have been particularly obvious:

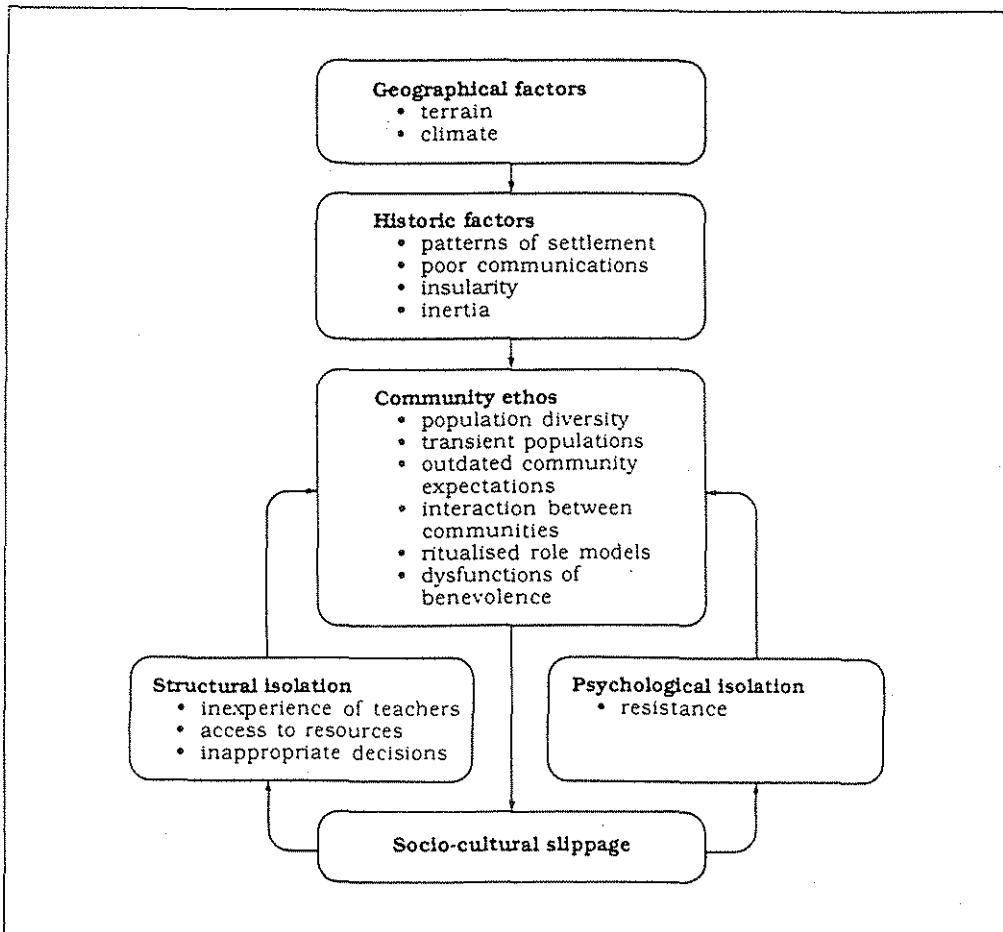
1. These transients have often been community leaders and their constant turnover has resulted in the irregular and spasmodic development of social structures. Examples of this can be found in the cyclic operation of organizations such as Lions, sporting clubs and the State Emergency Service, which are characterized by alternate highs and lows of enthusiasm and support.

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2. Tension arising from the clash of **values** between these two groups is often a significant underlying causes of the movement of transients through the community, leaving behind a negative impression that has lessened the self-esteem of the remaining population and overrides the very real positive aspects of community life.

Tarraleah's history as a single employer town and traditional security of employment helped to create a set of **outdated community expectations** that generally expressed the possible futures of the young in terms of a limited range of **stereotyped role models**. As a result limited value was placed on education as a life changing force, with **peer pressure** becoming a powerful barrier against educational success and ambition.

Figure 1
The Cycle of Isolation



The **dysfunctions of benevolence** arising from the incentives provided to workers created a complex set of attitudes that contributed to the development of a protected state of mind. Low rents, cheap power, free maintenance, free provision of facilities and other 'benefits' all contributed to an unreal perception of the world, breeding complacency and limiting the necessity for individual initiative. **Limited interaction** with other communities helped reinforce this unreal perception of the world.

The sum total of these barriers created a community in which attitudes and expectations remained generally stable over a long period of time and were protected from the rapid, unpredictable and turbulent changes sweeping mainstream society. The phenomenon of **socio-cultural slippage** was created, in which groups in society become disadvantaged as a result of the different rates of change between themselves and society as a whole.

This then is the environment from which Charlie wanted to break away. It was an environment that had a number of positive features, but which allowed no room for a non-traditional personal vision, nor offered the opportunities for anything other than more of what had gone before. In order to begin identifying the factors that helped him make the break, it is necessary to retell the story of how he finally succeeded to command an F-111.

At the age of seven Charlie's father took him for a joy flight and from that day on all he wanted to do was fly. However as Charlie admits, he was not a good student, even though he was studying subjects that he thought would maximize his chances of getting a flying job. He dropped out of college, losing any chance of getting into the air force. Still being motivated to fly, he took a job with the Forestry Commission in the central highlands, saving \$10,000 and borrowing another \$7,000 to pay for a flying course at Cessnock in NSW. Here he trained for a commercial license, including an instrument rating, but found it impossible to get a job because he had no experience. He worked his way north to Cairns through a variety of jobs and picked up some flying, but found general aviation a highly competitive environment with limited vacancies, so he started to reconsider the RAAF again.

As a result he went home to Tasmania where he enrolled in Rosny College and passed Maths, English and Physics. He then reapplied for the air force and entered a selection process where out of 1,000 applicants, 100 are presented to an officer for interview, and around 40 are recommended for a training course that perhaps 20 may pass. Thus commenced 10 weeks of junior officer training, 20 weeks of basic flight training, 30 weeks flying Macchi jet trainers, a 10 week Introduction to Fighters course and finally conversion training to the F-111 bomber. During basic flight training Charlie failed his flight test but passed on a second attempt three days later - "I was too complacent," he comments.

To quote Charlie - "I found the course really hard. It was so demanding that at times I asked myself if it was worth all the effort, but it's a matter of setting your goals and being totally determined to achieve them."

Charlie has described himself as not being a good student while at school, but he went on to succeed in a training program that put him among the best of the best. One is therefore forced to ask the question - What caused this difference in his performance? It is apparent that he could see the link between education and achieving his dream of flying, so other factors must have been at work. Investigation reveals that two factors were of importance in influencing his attitudes during his secondary career:

1. He was perhaps not yet ready to give the effort that is required to achieve academically and it was only during his early work experience that he realized the critical importance of 'setting one's goals and being totally committed to achieving them'.
2. The presentation of the subject matter did not allow for an obvious connection between present effort and future results nor equip him sufficiently with the necessary skills for goal achievement.

However much more can be gleaned from this case study and it is possible to compile a list of specific factors that contributed in varying degrees to his escape from the cycle of isolation. It is significant that Charlie's parents had European and English backgrounds. Close family lived in Hobart and contact was maintained on a regular basis. It is reasonable to surmise that these factors created a different unconscious value structure that resulted in both sons seeking futures outside the Hydro Electric Commission.

The other obvious factor in breaking the cycle of isolation is that Charlie had his own personal vision that motivated his behaviour over a long period of time, starting in primary school. Coupled with this was the evolution of a plan to achieve the vision that was characterised by a clear, specific objective, namely to achieve a career in flying, and a willingness to be flexible and have a range of options at his disposal. His initial plan was to leave college, which he viewed initially as unproductive, and then learn to fly and seek a career in general aviation. When this proved to be too difficult he was prepared to modify his plan and seek a career in the air force. It was at this stage that he finally understood the value of education in fulfilling his ambition and was prepared to go back to college to gain the necessary qualifications. When confronted by the awesome selection process involved in becoming a pilot in the air force, he was able to remain motivated by identifying a clear set of sub-objectives which reduced the challenging selection process into something a little less daunting - first officer training, then mastering the CT4 in basic flight training, followed by the Macchi jet, Fighter School and finally the F-111.

An essential part of this personal plan included the flexibility to accommodate alternative pathways to reach his prime objective. If one option led to a dead end, another was available to try. It is also obvious that failure did not bring this dream to an end. From each failure a lesson was learned that was internalized and added to a set of life experiences from which to draw at a later date. Finally, it is apparent that sheer determination was a significant factor throughout this personal plan which sustained Charlie's endeavours over an extended period of time. There is no doubt that Charlie will eventually become a senior pilot for an international airline.

It is possible to distill from this example a number of factors which were a significance in breaking the cycle of isolation in this particular case. They are listed below in no particular order of importance:

1. Parental interaction with outside communities and consequent exposure to alternative values,
2. The development of an early personal vision for the future,
3. Parental support, either financial, moral or emotional,
4. The ability to set personal goals and plan a course of action to achieve these,
5. The willingness to recognize mistakes and replan using a variety of pathways or options,

6. Sufficient personal confidence and self-esteem that allowed him to maintain his motivation in spite of repeated failure and present himself well during the formal aspects of the selection process.

It would be difficult to place these factors in any order of priority and they may well have been of varying importance over time, however there are certainly significant implications for the operation of schools and the development of special purpose programs arising from their identification, as they raise questions as to how and why funds are spent. In broad terms we can identify a number of these implications:

1. We need to expose students to a different set of values related to communities outside their immediate experience. This would be done not to pass judgement on which is the best, but to enable these students to make informed decisions and widen the possible range of choices best suited to their own needs.
2. Curricula must link 'learning' with 'doing' to show how school based learning relates to real life. By doing so we help create the possibility for young people to develop a vision of what might be possible for themselves. Such a vision becomes a powerful driving force and a step toward real empowerment.
3. Learners must be encouraged to accept responsibility for their own learning - we help create our futures, our futures are not created for us.
4. The concept of risk money should be reinforced. If we knew what worked in the area of retention, we would already be doing it. We need to find out more by taking risks to explore new ideas and be prepared to evaluate them objectively. Resource scarcity is real but must not dominate our thinking, otherwise it becomes petrified and perpetuates outmoded ideas and strategies. Educational programs must be resource efficient but still contain the flair to create among students some kind of motivating vision for the future.
5. Realistic goal setting and strategies for achievement need to be encouraged from as early an age as possible. Retention must become a primary goal and the purpose for such retention must be made clear, becoming a major emphasis of both primary schools and overall system endeavour.
6. Parents and the community must be involved in and share the widening of horizons at both an individual and community level.
7. Student achievement must be possible in both academic and non-academic terms, with the primary aim being to give students the capabilities for self advocacy, initiative and flexibility that will enable them to create their own futures.

Each of these points has implications for the way in which we expend our resources and can be used to design a philosophical framework for dealing with the issues of retention at both the primary and secondary levels of education. In order to plan effectively, **philosophies** need to be debated and clarified so that relevant **policies** can be developed, leading in turn to realistic and well thought out **programs**. As part of this process the achievement of real success will require that attitudes be developed or changed from as early an age as possible. Retention thus becomes a legitimate goal for primary as it is for secondary schools.

The level of retention throughout the nation has obviously increased significantly in recent times due to economic conditions, but we must be careful about being too enthusiastic about this for the wrong reasons. Retention in itself will not achieve worthwhile benefits for students or the nation, but must be the result of clear intentions and specific objectives. Students must emerge from their schooling with a positive outlook and a preparedness to promote themselves in a competitive environment. They must combine confidence and self esteem and have the ability to formulate a flexible plan that will enable them to achieve whatever objectives they consider appropriate to their needs.

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