

FOUR INFLUENCES ON YEAR TEN CAREER PLANNING IN RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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

Westarup is situated approximately three hundred kilometres from Perth and within a predominantly rural area of Western Australia. The population is approximately 500 (1986 census) - mainly in the 0-14 and 30-49 age groups.

There is the one secondary district high school in the community and students pursuing Tertiary Entrance Examination subjects must leave the district. Most go to boarding schools in one of the larger coastal centres. Nearly all of the 30 students who completed year ten in 1990 continued to year eleven.

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.

INFLUENCES ON CAREER DECISIONS

Family influences

Family influences on students' career decisions were considered in two dimensions: from the nuclear family and from extended families. 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 4 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): Seven boys said that both of their parents were consulted. (In three cases this involved absentee fathers who were only seen at weekends). Four respondents only said that their fathers were more important to them in their career discussion in the home than their mothers.

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Overall, mothers were the most important influence on the career choices within these students' homes. It is notable that siblings appear to play little part in such family discussions.

Students were asked about the influence of their 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 who lived in distant places. The influence of students' extended families was 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 not 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 numbers of responses (indicating some influence), uncles and aunts, particularly those who lived in other places in the same state but not in Perth were the most influential for girls. Discussion with cousins in these centres also appears to be influential.

For boys the main influences came from Perth, particularly from grandparents and from uncles and aunts. Boys and girls appear to be more or less equally influenced by their cousins.

School Influences/Teacher Influences

The local dimension was the influence of the school itself and the non local influence was considered to be the teachers.

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.

(a) For Girls: Positive attitudes to Westarup school were expressed by just over half of the girls in the study (N=6). They emphasised the attention they received from teachers and the fact that teachers were friendly. However, some pointed out that the school was "not competitive" and that this may not be a good background from which to enter a city school. It was also pointed out that there were limited choices in the curriculum and that the school organised few excursions. A major disadvantage also mentioned 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 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 faced the move to a city school next year, appeared to be more apprehensive about the adequacy of their rural preparation.

To ascertain attitudes to a non local dimension of education students were asked about their teachers. 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 prepared 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; the other 6 discussed their plans with teachers including the School Careers teacher.

Seven boys discussed their vocational futures with either a teacher or the careers teacher while 6 indicated that teachers played no part.

In this small rural school it appears that teachers exert limited influence on the career thinking of these year ten students.

Peer Influences

The third area of influence considered was that of their peers. This influence was considered in both local and non local terms.

The girls indicated that local peers had influenced their career decisions in about half of all cases (N=5) whereas 6 girls did not acknowledge any local peer influence. Local influence came from girls who were going away to the same school next year and the new experience appeared to be jointly anticipated. Fewer girls (N=4) indicated any non local peer influence on their career decision.

Boys indicated much less peer group influence on their career thinking than girls. All the boys noted that their peers had not influenced their career intentions; only two boys had discussed their career plans with a local peer. Only one boy in the study noted that he had discussed his career plans with a non local peer of the same gender.

Significant Others as Influences on Career Choices

In making career choices it has been found (Stevens, 1988) that in some cases a significant person in a student's life can exert a major influence. In this study significant others are not considered to be within any of the above three categories (family, school/teachers or peers).

There were few local significant others who exerted influence on the career decisions of the year ten girls at Westarup. There were several non local significant others who influenced the girls. Over half could indicate someone in this category with whom they had discussed their career plans.

Only one boy in the study indicated a significant other who had influenced his career thinking.

Overall, this rural year ten class has not been much influenced by any local or non local significant others in their career thinking.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This is a small study conducted in one rural school in Western Australia and the above results should therefore be treated with caution. The main influences on the 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 criticism of 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 although almost all of this year ten class intends to go on to complete their secondary education. There was some discussion with peers on their career thinking but girls are more influenced by this source than are boys.

REFERENCE

Stevens K. J. (1988) "Career Choices and Rural Futures in an Isolated Queensland Community" in D. T. Reeves (ed) Rural Communities Determining Their Future - The Quiet Revolution, SPERA, Melbourne

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