

YOUTH EXODUS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES: VALORISING LEARNING FOR CHOICE

(SPERA KEYNOTE 2009 CONFERENCE ADDRESS)

R. JOHN HALSEY

*Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities,
Flinders University*

INTRODUCTION

One of the common characteristics of rural communities globally, and especially those in the developed countries of the world, is the exodus of youth in search of 'greener pastures'.

Alston and Kent (2003) argue that "[t]he lack of meaningful full-time work in rural areas is one of the main reasons for young people leaving rural communities" (p. 6). Limited post-secondary education and training is another significant reason for the exodus of youth from rural areas. Often added to this is a gender imbalance, where young females leave rural areas at a higher rate than young males. There are also challenges associated with the education of Indigenous youth so they have choices about their cultural identity, employment opportunities and personal fulfilment.

While this exodus of youth has been happening for centuries and has often been spurred along by fundamental changes in the way societies organise themselves, such as occurred during the Industrial Revolution, it is now one of the most challenging issues confronting rural communities. This is because "youth are fundamentally future-oriented and, as such, are a critical human resource for rebuilding and re-energising rural contexts" (Halsey 2008, p. 2). As Salt (2004) asserts, "[i]t is the loss of youth and the partial replacement of that demographic by older people that is of most concern...[because the] structural shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of [its] vitality..." (p. 68). Put another way, the future of a rural town or community is linked to the choices youth make—to stay, to leave, or to return after moving out to experience life elsewhere or to complete education and training not available in the local area.

This paper explores *learning for choice* as a contribution towards addressing the decline of youth in rural areas and in doing so commences with a section on rurality to illustrate some of the diversity of understandings about the concept and to provide locational and contextual dimensions for the paper. I then introduce the concepts of *strong choice* and *weak choice* and amplify Bernstein's (1971) message system theory about how schools realise their purposes. This is followed by some theoretical framing based on Corbett's (2007a) research in a fishing community in Nova Scotia. The final section of the paper attempts to bring together the problem

and the theorising using a modified case study to show how learning for choice constitutes a way of helping retain youth in rural areas.

RURAL PLACES; RURAL SPACES; RURAL FACES

It is widely recognised there are many definitions and understandings of what is rural, where is rural and who is rural. It is also widely recognised that definitions and understandings vary according to many factors, not the least of which are the physical parameters of the context being considered and its prevailing cultural dimensions. What seems to be less widely recognised, however, is the complexity of rural contexts – as a person who had lived for over forty years in rural and remote Australia said to me a few years ago, “When you have visited one rural town, you have visited one rural town!”

Essentially there are instrumental/quantitative definitions of rural, and definitions of a more nuanced and qualitative kind. Quantitative definitions of ‘rural’ emphasise population size and distance from large centres where there is an extensive range of human services available. Qualitative definitions, on the other hand, while recognising that population size and distance are contributing elements to what constitutes ‘rural’, focus on the cultural and relational dimensions of places and people.

Griffith (1996) argues that “the descriptors, rural and remote, have been shown to be so generic and so imprecisely defined that they are relatively useless terms” (p. 5). This led him to develop a services (such as education) access score, which is derived from “the population of the urban centre or locality containing the school, the distance from the school locality to the most likely accessed service centre, and the economic resources of the school population” (Jones, 2000, p. 8).

Hugo (2000), in a somewhat similar vein to Griffith (1996), argues there is much confusion about the classification of the population of Australia living outside of cities with populations greater than 100,000 persons. He states that a significant amount of this “confusion regarding rural, remote and regional stems from an attempt to combine into a single classification two distinctly different conceptual elements: urban/rural and, accessibility/remoteness” (Hugo, 2000, p. 1). As these are very different concepts, Hugo (2000) believes that “[a]ny attempt to classify non-metropolitan into rural and remote areas is misplaced. We need to classify areas in terms of their urbanness/ruralness and we also need to classify them by their degree of remoteness” (p. 2).

Rural and remote area determinations for government schooling provision in Australia are based upon a blend of size of population centre and distance from either the capital city or a major regional centre (Jones, 2000, pp. 12–17). In the Northern Territory, “country consists of the whole Territory except for areas within a 75 km radius of Darwin and Alice Springs, the two urban centres with a population of 20,000 persons or more” (Jones, 2000, p. 17). In contrast to this, in South Australia for example, rural government schools are those located more than 80 kms from Adelaide and non-government rural schools are those more than 50kms from the Adelaide General Post Office (Jones, 2000, p. 15).

While a geographical approach to delineating and defining ‘rural’ essentially focuses on size, distance from a city or large regional centre, and access to services, a

sociological or qualitative approach on the other hand pays attention to essences of places and spaces in order to gain an understanding of rural and rurality. Put another way:

the notions of movement, flow from place to place, the ways in which places are connected by histories rather than geographies, and the idea put forward by Deleuze that place is an issue of becoming and identification, all constitute interesting problematics for [an] analysis [and understanding] of rural... (McConaghy, 2002, p. 14)

Emphasising place presents options for incorporating what Mulley (1999) calls the vernacular – “people’s experience of the rural” (p. 3) – for shaping conceptions of rurality. This Mulley argues, may be “the key” to enhancing understanding of rurality, because “while academics struggle to precisely define the rural, most people have a general conception of what constitutes ‘rural’ in their mind’s eye” (1999, p. 3).

Stereotypes and myths about the Australian bush and bush characters, as an instance of the vernacular, have a long history and continue to have some hold on understandings about rurality. For example, *The Advertiser* newspaper (Devlin, 2006), in a feature article to commemorate the Black Tuesday bushfires on Eyre Peninsula in 2005, used the banner headline “*Bush spirit shines amid tears, pain*”. Kapferer (1990) cited in Hooper (2001) lists “egalitarianism, independence, physical endurance, doggedness, taciturnity, loyalty, resistance to oppression, fortitude and perhaps a naïve faith in humanity” (p. 2) amongst the commonly held stereotypical images of rural people. Cruickshank, Lysgard, Magnussen & Myland (n.d.) suggest that ideas and assumptions like these “have social consequences” (p. 4). As well, “ideas about rurality are just that and not objective truths [which]...opens up the possibility of doing things differently”. Further, Cruickshank et al. (n.d.) argue that “‘rurality’ is...not something given, but a social construction: its existence and the meaning that is put to it is dependent on its producers” (p. 4).

This brief overview of some of the dimension and tensions inherent in the concept of rural provides a purposeful framing – or using Soja’s (1996) terminology, *Other spaces, Other ways* – for exploring education in and for rural contexts, by valorising choice.

LEARNING FOR CHOICE

A primary role of education has been, and continues to be, equipping young people with knowledge, skills and dispositions to become autonomous, responsible and productive citizens. In other words, education is critical in developing and nurturing human agency, and Giddens’ (1993) description of the term agency as “the lived-through process of everyday conduct” (p. 81) is particularly apt. From the perspective of sustaining and sustainable rural contexts, a major question flowing from the role of education as stated is: so what might it translate into for youth, their learning and their mobility? Answering the question first requires some discussion of choice.

A *real* choice for rural young people and their education and pathways beyond schooling has often been defined and actualised as the choice to move out or

leave home. As Corbett (2007b) remarks about youth living in the coastal fishing community in Canada that was the subject of his research: “community is not a place that can sustain youth throughout their working life” and “[t]he privilege of being able to choose to stay is fraught with uncertainty” (pp. 775, 776). This in large measure echoes Alston’s and Kent’s (2003) finding about rural contexts as quoted in the opening section of this paper.

In the Australian context, choice in education came to prominence through the work of the Commonwealth Schools Commission Choice and Diversity in Government Schooling Project. It was established “to explore the concept of choice as an approach to educational improvement” (1980, p.7). It was through working with the Choice and Diversity Project that I became involved in thinking about how different framings of choice might result in improvements for students. While I use the ideas of weak choice and strong choice drawn from my experiences with the Choice and Diversity Project in this article, the full discussion paper of the Commission on choice also refers to “passive” and “active” choice respectively (1980, p.16).

Choice when linked with education frequently means being able to select between options such as which school to attend, which subjects to study, and which career pathway to follow. This concept of choice—of essentially selecting from a menu designed by others—for the purposes of this paper is called *weak choice*. The consequences of a *weak choice* nevertheless may be beneficial to an individual, such as achieving a high tertiary education rank by selecting subjects taught by teachers who have a track record of ‘getting students through Year 12’. The relevant point to be noted in relation to the purpose of this paper is that in a *weak choice* context, the chooser has little or no say about determining the options available to them.

Strong choice on the other hand is where those who need to make choices about their learning participate in constructing the options available to them. A *strong choice* context might well have fewer options than a weak choice context, but the match between learning needs and aspirations and study program is a better fit. *Strong choice* is characterised more as a partnership—of “common effort toward common goals” (Seeley, 1981, p. 65)—than an obligatory set of arrangements set in train as a consequence of choosing from a predetermined range of options.

It may be argued that moving to a *strong choice* approach to learning at a system or even school level would create resource and administrative demands that could not be met. Imagine allowing every student to decide what it is they want to learn, with whom, when and how—a sure recipe for chaos? Two points in response—*strong choice* is not about educators or systems opting out and ‘letting things run’ with no regard for the consequences. Secondly, *strong choice* is about creating contexts where learning is negotiated expansively and with the intention of being pro-active in addressing issues that impact on learning in-situ. In other words, as a ‘local’ might say, you roll up your sleeves and work out how to address the issues, to minimise students leaving their home and community perhaps for good.

What then are the enabling pieces of education architecture underpinning *strong choice* and learning for choice, and how might these play out in a rural community to reduce the drift of youth, and thereby potentially enhance community and wider sustainability?

THEORY FOR VALORISING CHOICE AND RURAL EDUCATION

Firstly, Bernstein (1971) in his seminal paper entitled "*On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge*" argues that the knowledge functions of education—in this paper, read 'schools' for 'education'—are "realized through three message systems—curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation" (p. 47). Bernstein (1971) declares that "[c]urriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realization of this knowledge on the part of the taught" (p. 47). These definitions are value-laden, powerful and pervasive in prescribing what schools do and for what purpose(s). While I agree with Bernstein's framing, two other message systems are part of the educational architecture required for creating and nurturing a *strong choice* context for learning for choice. They are organisational structures and processes, and location-mobility.

The *organisational structures and processes* message system plays a very important role in highlighting the need for flexibility of learning arrangements. The *location-mobility* message system focuses on explicitness about post-school career and living options. It is named separately because it is central to addressing a key problem facing many rural communities as already stated—the loss of youth. Put another way, the location-mobility message system is intended to 'ensure' that discussions and decisions with rural young people about their education and post-education trajectories, *always* include meaningful considerations of the possible impacts of their decisions in relation to the local community. As Bandura (1989) writes, "people [youth] can generate novel ideas and innovative actions about their past experiences [by]...bring[ing] influence to bear on their motivation and action in efforts to realize valued futures" (p. 1182).

Secondly, Corbett's (2007a) seminal research into schooling in a fishing community in Nova Scotia, Canada, provides some other powerful tools for looking more deeply and consequentially into learning for choice.

Essentially, Corbett's research is based around a question I believe resonates with all rural teachers and leaders—"how do some rural youth 'learn to leave', while others 'learn to stay'?" (p. 9). The theoretical framing for Corbett's research is rich, extensive and especially pertinent for rural educators interested in engaging with a fundamental rethinking of rural education and what it means for individuals and communities. The heart of it is a fresh engagement with resistance theory from the sociology of education, which draws very substantially on Willis's (1977) pioneering work, *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*, and Bourdieu's "logic of practice and what he calls 'habitus'" (Corbett, 2007a, p. 45).

While acknowledging limitations and criticisms of Willis's (1977) resistance theory, including that of Roman and Christian-Smith (1988), Rikowski (1997), and Kelly (1997), who together argue that the claims for it are over stated, Corbett (2007a) believes, and I concur, that "resistance has value...[especially] in the context of particular locations" (p. 44). This value is strengthened as a theoretical tool for investigating what is going on in the lives of young people when they wrestle with their post-school options and how they might be assisted, by enjoining with Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus', that is, thinking about how different kinds of contexts might influence choices individuals and communities make. Corbett, while greatly

valuing Bourdieu's work on habitus, argues that the idea may not be as rigid in practice as that delineated by the author "because of overlapping discourses" (2007a, p. 47). Corbett asserts, for instance, that the habitus of families may have a range of valued capitals and the "spatial turn in social theory [see for example Soja, 1996] has introduced what is now understood as multiple geographies of youth, each containing differential developmental trajectories and patterns of habitus" (2007a, p. 47).

Many, perhaps most, rural schools are well situated to engage in a *strong choice* approach to education because of their size and proximity with community. In claiming this, two of Corbett's (2007a) research conclusions are pertinent for progressing learning for choice, that is, learning that values and acknowledges the richness of 'the local' as well as 'the universal/global'. The first conclusion is that individuals involved in his study "detest[ed] and resist[ed] being drawn into abstract systems preferring to remain multi-skilled, hands-on, and community-based" (p. 259). Secondly, he concludes that most individuals:

resist the mobility imperative built in to the idealized education trajectory and remain "around here." In the process they build alternative visions of success that involve persistence, survival and resistance to the forces [of modernity] that seek to displace them" (p. 259).

ILLUSTRATING LEARNING FOR CHOICE

Karoonda-East Murray in South Australia is a rural district of 4,500 square kilometres with a combined townships and community population of around 1,200. Broad-acre grain and sheep farming is the dominant agricultural focus of the district. The main town, Karoonda, is the administrative centre of local government and also provides retail and commercial services. There is an Area School (combined primary and secondary) in the main town of the district with an enrolment of about 130 students. It was established over 50 years ago through closures and amalgamations of one- and two-teacher rural schools under a general policy of consolidation of education provision in rural areas. Eighty per cent of students attending the school travel by bus. The enrolment of the school peaked at nearly 400 twenty years ago. One immediately obvious consequence of this is a very favourable student-to-space ratio. The school is the largest organisation in the town and district. Increasingly, students move out of the district for tertiary education and training, and for employment when they have completed school.

The school, like many others trying to maintain curriculum diversity with declining enrolments, uses a combination of face-to-face teaching, distance education services, as well as multi-year level classes. It also makes students aware of post-school vocational pathways which include some school-based apprenticeship programs.

Critical to the sustainability of the Karoonda-East Murray district is availability of water. While rainfall is the chief source of water for broad-acre cereal cropping, most of the agricultural businesses are also very dependent on reliable supplies of quality bore water for stock and for horticulture such as potato, onion and carrot growing. There are 212 water licences representing approximately 400 bores in the Mallee Prescribed Wells Area which incorporates Karoonda-East

Murray, as well as several other towns and districts (South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board, 2007–08).

Living and working in Karoonda-East Murray is a person who over 40 years has acquired a very high level of knowledge and expertise about bores, windmills, pumps and reticulation systems. He also has a good working knowledge of the geology and hydrology of the region and, as importantly, knows where to go and who to see when he has questions and issues about these. Who will the primary producers turn to for bore services and advice when he retires or leaves the district? Put another way, how can the “extinction of [local] experience” (Nablan, 1993 cited in Pretty, 2002, p. 21) be avoided when a working lifetime’s worth of knowledge and expertise is taken out of a rural district’s bank of human resources? While it is tempting to argue that a demand for bore services will be met by market forces, in rural areas especially this cannot be assumed (Pretty, 2002).

Learning for choice in a *strong choice* context may be a more community-beneficial way of providing an alternative to relying on ‘someone from outside the district’ to provide continuity of bore and water reticulation expertise. Assuming as a given the educational architecture outlined above from Bernstein (1971), activating such an approach essentially involves four elements of educational provisioning working together.

Firstly, there needs to be commitment by the school and community to profile and promote employment pathways for youth which include high quality and high qualification ‘global jobs’ locally, such as ‘bore and ground water expert’. Secondly, in promoting and advocating the value of ‘local’ quality employment, the school and community recognise that youth may want to be mobile and may need to move outside the district for post-secondary education and training. Both of these framing elements highlight the local-global tension which has become a major issue for many, if not most, rural towns (Davison, 2005).

The third element is an approach to curriculum and learning that directly engages the learner in what they want to learn and what it might be opportune for them to learn. Central to the third element is the school and community being explicit with ‘their youth’ about the kinds of likely future expertise required so continuation of the local economy, and therefore the community, is optimised and has capacity to respond to fluidity and change over time. In relation to the example used of continuity of local bore water supply expertise, this element would include exploring with youth what education and training for a career in this field requires, likely resourcing to start up a small business or take over an existing one, sources of support to do this and, very importantly, introductions to relevant community mentors to help facilitate their transition from the world of a student to the world of a worker. It would also explicitly include discussions about social and occupational mobility with a view to ensuring that the learners knew about the choices available beyond school. This is essential because youth need to be deeply aware that their post-school life is being negotiated and planned linked to local community needs while also keeping open options of moving out and away from community.

The fourth element focuses on school structures and processes. Preparedness by a school to be very flexible about when and where learning occurs, and under what kinds of supervisory arrangements, are crucial factors. Challenging the youth

of a rural community to think seriously about building their beyond-schooling future around likely local community expertise succession planning requirements is in many ways 'a big ask'. This is particularly so when taking into consideration what is happening in primary industries due to the impact of globalisation. As Lawrence (2005) argues, "many of the changes occurring are not conducive to the retention of natural capital, or to the building of social capital..." (p. 105). Notwithstanding these significant cautions, there are some ameliorating contingencies that can be put in place at a local level. They include building into the overall design and delivery of study programs for the purposes intended safeguards for career and life mobility, like ensuring that negotiated study plans and expected outcomes meet approved national standards. Put another way, pushing the boundaries of schooling must not expose students to unnecessary risk *vis a vis* their futures. A critical role of schooling is one of opening up rather than closing down or narrowly streaming opportunities, especially when argued from the perspective of *strong choice*.

The diagram below summarises the main dimensions of *strong choice* and learning for choice.

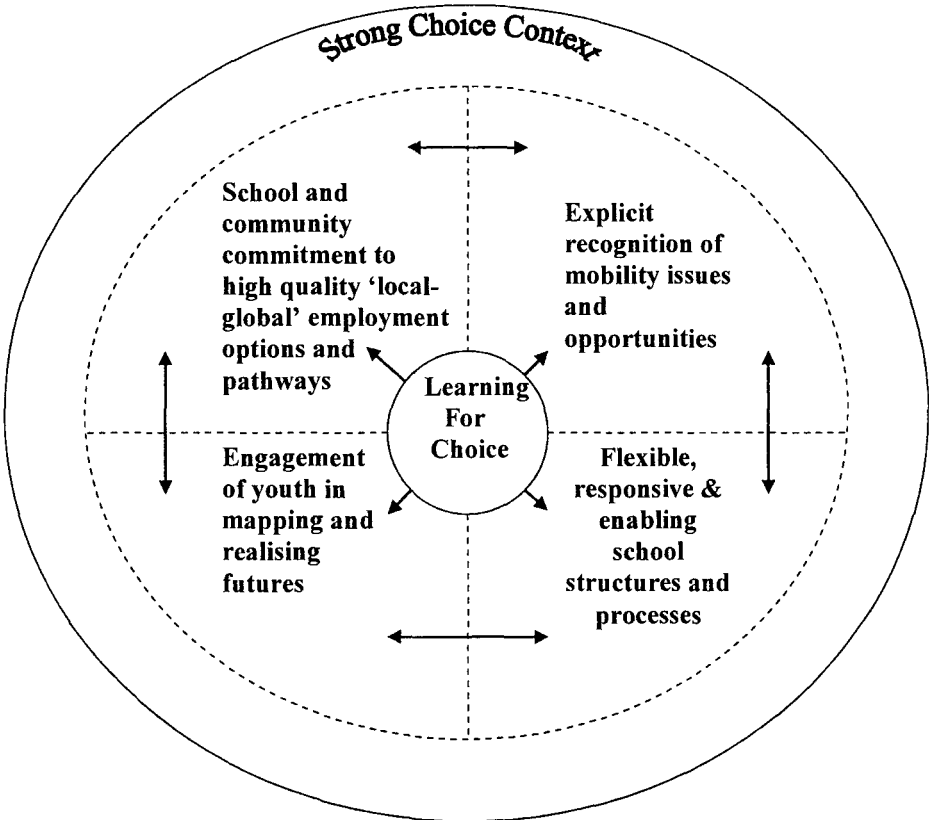


Figure 1: Learning for Choice

SUMMARY

I opened this paper this paper by signalling that the exodus of youth from rural areas is a major issue for Australia because youth are vital to securing sustainable futures for rural communities and the nation.

Corbett's (2007a) seminal study of a fishing village in Nova Scotia provides innovative theorising for reconceptualising how education – rural schools – might be re-framed to play an significant role in addressing rural youth out-migration to cities and large regional centres in search of 'better opportunities than you get around here'. Bernstein's (1971) message system analysis of how schools do their work and accomplish their mission, augmented by two others – organisational structures and processes, and location-mobility – provides educational architecture for contexts of *strong choice*. I have argued that *strong choice* is a pre-requisite for learning for choice about post-school life in rural communities where, typically, there are only two choices – 'do I leave or do I stay'.

Four critical elements of educational provisioning are essential to progress *strong choice* and learning for choice for rural youth. Connecting each of the elements requires a tenacious commitment to engage youth deeply in designing their learning, with explicit and expansive information about possible social and professional mobility pathways and options freely available to them. This is essential in arguing for a fundamental re-think of how rural education might be reframed, because the unproductive duality of either learning for leaving or learning for staying precludes learning for both – learning for choice.

REFERENCES

- Alston, M., & Kent, J. (2003). Education access for Australia's rural young people: A case of social exclusion. *Australian Journal of Education*, 47(1), 5–17.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory. *American Psychologist*, 44 (9), pp. 1175–1184.
- Bernstein, B. (1971). On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge. In M.F.D. Young, (Ed.), *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Choice In Education and Sources Of Present Administrative Practice (1980). Discussion Paper No.1, Choice and Diversity in Government Schooling Project, Schools Commission/State Education Departments, Canberra.
- Corbett, M. (2007a). *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Corbett, M. (2007b). Travels in Space and Place and Rural Schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30 (3), 771–792.
- Cruickshank, J., Lysgard, K. L., Magnussen, M. & Myland, T. S. (n.d.). *Competing discourses of the rural Norway*. Agder Research, Kristiansand, Norway.
- Davison, G. (2005). Rural Sustainability in Historical Perspective. In C. Cocklin. & J. Dibden (Eds.) *Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Devlin, D. (2006, January 12). Bush spirit shines amid tears, pain. *The Advertiser*, p. 7.
- Giddens, A. (1993). *New Rules of Sociological Method*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Griffith, D. A. (1996). *The Development of the Griffith Service Access Frame–Zones of Relative Access and Their Potential in Research, Policy Making and Service Delivery*. Retrieved on 15 April 2005 from <http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/ARERA/research/DG2.HTM>
- Halsey, R. J. (2008, November). *Rural Schools and Rural Revitalisation: Blazing New Trails*. Keynote Paper: Dallas, Texas: National Community Education Association Conference.
- Hooper, J.N. (2001). *Rurality*. Retrieved August 5, 2004, from http://www.seorf.ohiou.edu/~xx042/r_ctr/Rurality.htm
- Hugo, G. (2000). *What is happening in rural and regional populations?* Retrieved February 8, 2005, from <http://www.regional.org.au/au/countrytowns/keynote/hugo.htm>
- Jones, R. (2000). *Development of a common definition of, and approach to data collection on, the geographic location of students to be used for nationally comparable reporting of outcomes of schooling within the "National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century"*. Melbourne: Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.
- Kelly, U. (1997). *Schooling desire: Literacy, cultural politics and pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Lawrence, G. (2005). Globalisation, agricultural production systems and rural restructuring. In C. Cocklin & J. Dibden, *Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia*. Sydney, Australia: University of NSW Press.
- McConaghy, C. (2002). *Situated Pedagogies: Researching Quality Teaching and Learning for Rural New South Wales*. ARC Linkage Grant Discussion Paper: University of New England.
- Mulley, S.J. (1999). *Constructing the Countryside: Vernacular Culture and Conceptions of Rurality*. Retrieved April 15, 2005, from <http://www.uoguelph.ca/~smulley/comp.html>
- Pretty, J. (2002). *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land and Nature*. London: Earthscan Publications.
- Rikowski, G. (1997). Scorched earth: Prelude to rebuilding Marxist educational theory. *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 18 (4), 551–74.

- Roman, L., & Christian-Smith, L. (Eds.) (1998). *Feminism and the politics of popular culture*. London: Falmer.
- Salt, B. (2004). *The Big Shift*. Victoria, Australia: Hardie Grant Books.
- Seeley, D. S. (1981). *Education Through Partnership: Mediating Structures and Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Ballinger Publishing Company.
- Soja, E.W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. USA: Blackwell.
- South Australia. South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board. *Mallee Prescribed Wells Area: Annual Water Use Report (2007–2008)*. Adelaide: Government of South Australia.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)