POST SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL ISSUES FACING FAMILIES IN RURAL NORTH QUEENSLAND

A REPORT ON RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

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Vocational choice has been a critical issue for rural Queensland families for many years although it remains a little documented aspect of the lives of secondary school students and their parents who live in the outback. While rural education has received official recognition as an area of disadvantage in the Australian education system for almost two decades (Schools Commission, 1975; Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia, 1976) vocational choice in outback schools, which is central to the relationships between both school and work and school and tertiary education, has not been prominent in the research literature in spite of several recent reports (Boomer, 1988; Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991; National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1991).

This research project has been designed to investigate the processes of post secondary school education and vocational choices for families in a representative community and to consider the implications of this issue for schools and policy makers.

The research project was initiated by Dr David McSwan of James Cook University's Rural Education Research and Development Centre and Dr Ken Stevens of the Faculty of Education at Victoria University in Wellington in New Zealand. Specifically, the research will investigate how families with year ten, eleven and twelve students in a selected North Queensland community make choices about post secondary school education and careers.

VOCATIONAL CHOICE AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Making post secondary school educational and vocational choices in rural Australia presents families with particular problems which can in part be related to geographic isolation and unfamiliarity with urban lifestyles. Rural families until the last decade have had to sometimes make these decisions much earlier than their urban counterparts (Stevens, 1988; 1994). What has not been recognised in the Australian research or policy literature is the special circumstances under which so many young rural people and their families have to make educational and vocational decisions about careers in places with which they have had little direct contact. Making educational and vocational decisions at the conclusion of secondary education, regardless of whether this is to be at the conclusion of year ten, eleven or twelve, requires different skills from those needed by urban students and their families. Rural post secondary school career decisions in many cases require young people to mentally project their lives from a known environment and lifestyle to one that is usually urban and largely unknown. It is not widely recognised that career decisions have to be taken at earlier ages by rural people in small communities which do not provide education to years eleven and twelve.

Through interviews and questionnaires the decision making environment of each year ten eleven and twelve students is being explored. Specifically, each students' local and non-local family is being considered in terms of the influence that it exerts on the post secondary school decision making process. In earlier research families were found to be the major source of career information for geographically isolated students (Stevens, 1989), including extended families. For boys, fathers and older brothers were of particular importance while the girls, mothers and older sisters have been found to be influential. Sometimes members of a student's extended family with whom contact is regularly maintained whether by visits, letters or phone conversations can be influential to the post secondary school educational or vocational decision.

The nature and the extent of the contact that students have with their extended families is being considered in some detail in the present research.

As well as considering the influence of each student's nuclear and extended families, this research will consider the role of local and non-local peers within the decision making environment of each year ten, eleven and twelve student in the local north Queensland community. Students in rural communities share the common problem of having to project their school experiences to their post secondary school lives at earlier stages of their education than their urban counterparts. For some, this projection will involve finding out about and then evaluation further secondary education (years eleven and twelve in other schools followed by possible tertiary education options); for others, employment, particularly if this is locally available, is a more appropriate and attractive option.

Students in the North Queensland school selected for this study have been asked about the nature and the extent of contact with peers in other places as well as within their own community. This data is to provide information about the extent to which non-local contact with people of similar age influences rural students' career choice processes. This information can provide an indication of the extent to which young people whose homes are geographically isolated are linked to others of their own age as well as the extent to which they inter-relate in discussion about their post secondary school futures.

Earlier research (Stevens, 1989) found that the school had little influence on the post year ten educational and vocational choices that rural students made. The School's contribution to the vocational choices of senior students and their families, as measured in terms of the influence of teachers and the management team of principal and deputy principal, was minimal. Very few year ten students consulted either their teachers, the principal or the deputy principal about their plans for the following year. The reasons for this remain unclear and the present research will investigate this aspect of the decision making environment in some detail. As well as considering the influence, or lack of influence of these senior personnel in the local school, the present research will consider what students and their families know about education in other places and how any information that is acquired has been obtained. Some families that were studied in earlier research (Stevens, 1989) were found to have relatives in other Queensland towns and, through them, developed an understanding of this other place, including its schools. Other families however, had little contact outside the local rural area in which they lived and, accordingly, had little understanding of education in other places. Teachers have a potentially important role as mediators of urban educational institutions and lifestyles for people in rural areas, although few have received training in this aspect of their jobs. There are educational policy implications in the lack of influence that teachers appear to have in the post secondary educational and vocational choices of rural school leavers which will be considered in this research.

The final dimension of the environment in which post year ten educational and vocational choices are made is the influence of 'significant other' in each student's environment. The notion of 'significant other' was widely interpreted to include local and non local other people who were considered to be in any way influential in the career choice processes of the young school leavers in the study, but who could not be categorised as peers or as nuclear or extended family members. Significant others were people with whom the cohort of rural students in the study came into contact in terms of their post year ten decision and who exerted influence in any way at all. It was decided to include the media in this category and to consider the newspapers, magazines and books that the young people read. Within the media aspect of significant others was televisions, video and cinema. Accordingly, it was possible when considering significant others within a student's decision making environment, to include such people as media personalities, sports people and those with high social profiles at national and even international levels. Accordingly, the rural students in the present study were asked what they read each week and in what ways they came into contact with the media, both within their own community and

when visiting other places, particularly urban areas. In some cases the media played a major role in shaping young rural people's perceptions of the non-local worlds into which they had to project their post-secondary school futures. In other cases, trade or professional publications provided valuable insights into non-local carers and lifestyles such as the year ten boy who avidly read computer magazines and who dreamed of becoming a computer scientist.

The four dimensions of each student's environment that were considered: family, school, peers and significant others were all analysed in both local and non-local dimensions. All students in this study share the same local environment but it was found that they differed in terms of their knowledge of an interaction with non-local environments. For some students the non-local environment was limited to North Queensland and a few of the students in this category had never visited the coast and had never seen the sea. Students in this category had little understanding of urban lifestyles. Most of their knowledge of urban life was gleaned from the media, particularly television. Other students were found to have wide non-local environments; they had travelled interstate and had, in a few cases, even been overseas. Students in the latter category were all familiar with at least one Australian city and could compare urban and rural lifestyles and could discuss the merits of each with the interviewer.

In considering the local and non-local environments in which students in this rural North Queensland community interacted in making their post secondary school choices, the significance of the variance of their knowledge and experience of other places, particularly urban ones, requires further consideration by both rural educators and policy makers. It is common for rural Australians to be considered as homogeneous in terms of their isolation from main centres of population. It is not common, for example, to distinguish between rural Tasmania and rural Victoria and rural NW Queensland or the rural north of Western Australia when discussing 'rural Australia'. There are considerable differences however in terms of the extent to which rural people in the latter states are isolated from main centres of population in relation to rural people who live in the smaller and more heavily populated states of Australia.

The present research suggests that there are grounds for taking rural distinctions a step further by questioning the implicit assumption of homogeneity of the experience of isolation within a particular Australian rural community. Rural families in the present study have been found to differ considerably in terms of the nature and the extent of their contact with urban areas at an important junction in their lives - the making of the post secondary and school educational and vocational decision. Some rural Australian families are more isolated than others if contact with urban Australia is accepted as a measure of rurality.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VOCATIONAL CHOICE FOR RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Negative perceptions of the quality of education provided in local rural schools has been a key issue for rural-urban migration and a reason for the decline of small towns in the north of Australia.

American writers, such as Lambert (1994), Nachtigal (1994) and Shelton (1994) have focused on the school-community relationship in rural areas and have demonstrated the key role which schools play in the long-term sustainability of the rural areas and have been demonstrated the key role which schools play in the long-term sustainability of the rural community. Central to their concept of rural community and economic development is the way in which schools, through the curriculum, promote either the traditional urban industrial (export) model or a sustainable community-focused model.

The latter approach draws its rationale from the proposition that schools are central to the regenerative processes in rural towns and, as such, must fuse teachers, students, commerce and industry into the social fabric, culture and economic life of the community. The implications of

this perspective for schools in preparing children for local (and urban) employment are clear and demands that a curriculum be developed which is bedded in the community.

Queensland schools deliver a curriculum which is developed in urban (metropolitan) centres and largely serves to prepare students for university courses and urban employment. This reinforces the rural-urban drift and ensures that the most academically-able students are lost to small towns.

This study, in providing insights into the role of the school in the vocational choice processes of school leavers, will give comparative information on non-school influences on young people.

THE QUEENSLAND RESEARCH

This research which has been outlined will be used to investigate several inter-related problems within the issue of post year ten, eleven and twelve educational and vocational choice. By conducting this research in what we believe is representative rural Queensland community, the study will subsequently become a template for further investigation in other small and geographically isolated Australian communities.

From data collected to date two issues have emerged that will be investigated separately:

- The educational and policy issue of whether to increase staff numbers within small rural secondary schools or enhance the role of distance education. The issue is one of local vs central control over rural teaching and learning together with the larger issue of whether much of the distinctly rural character of schools in small centres like this one will be lost in distance education is widely adopted in future. Recent developments in distance education in Australia however (National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992; Oliver and Reeves, 1993) make future electronic forms of delivery of education an unavoidable policy consideration.

- Perceptions of tertiary education by rural school leavers. The Schools Commission Report in 1975 noted that rural school leavers usually made very traditional vocational choices and that they were less likely to enrol in tertiary educational institutions than their urban counterparts. The picture that is emerging from the present study is that this issue has to be considered in terms of the perceptions that particular young people and their families have within a rural community. It is not appropriate to consider all members of a small rural community or even of a single class in a rural school as equally isolated. This research has found that perceptions of urban Australia and of tertiary education within a single rural community differ. Measurement of the nature and extent of differing perceptions of urban Australian and of tertiary education in this representative community may provide insights into a critical aspect of rural-urban social and educational differentiation.

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