

CHOICES AND CHANCES IN PROGRAMS AND PLANS FOR THE GAINING OF CREDENTIALS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A SMALL RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Research about rural education, and education policy directions for rural schools, are set against formal measures of 'disadvantage'. These measures about rural 'disadvantage' have been defined, evaluated and compared to more 'advantaged' provincial and urban schools. Rarely has educational research or policy been 'inverted' to be defined, evaluated and prescribed from within the rural, to focus on education for rural young people. This paper tests the validity of the historic and contemporary emphasis about disadvantage in rural and remote education. It evaluates the ways staff and students prepared for student transition from school to employment or further education in one small rural high school. The school of the study is situated in a community which has all accepted measures of economic and social disadvantages including isolation and low socio-economic status. Prolonged drought, and government intervention to replace native timber harvesting with national parks in state forest areas, and the expansion of softwood plantations on farmland, together have restricted employment in the these locally restructured timber and farming activities.

The school's plan and programs designed to prepare students for their transition to employment and further education, acknowledge that the high school, the community it serves, and its students, are 'disadvantaged' in all measures. Key school documents, as these described the school's programs, activities and endeavours and staff interviews produce a view from 'above'. This was compared to the view of the Year 11 school cohort who had been invited to participate in two Focus Group Interviews, and a From School to Further Education or Work Survey. Their view from 'below' indicated a significant disconnection between the school staff and the students about what values and experiences most influence student decisions about school completion, and their chances of achieving their chosen transition goals. The study revealed that the focus on 'disadvantage', as this underpinned the school's plans and practices for student transition, called into question the relevance of the programs that were designed to redress educational 'disadvantage'.

INTRODUCTION

Research about education in rural areas, and formal education policy directions for rural schools, are each based on the idea that rural students are 'disadvantaged'. Specific indicators have been devised and refined by researchers and educators to measure education 'achievement' for rural children, and then comparing the perceived causes of these 'disadvantages' to the measured 'advantages' of students elsewhere. It is usually specific groups in the urban student cohort that are measurably advantaged compared to rural students. Rarely have educational research or policy directions been inverted to be defined, evaluated and prescribed simply from within the rural, to design and produce education for rural young people.

The research for this paper sought to identify what it is that produces both unique and familiar transitional intentions for Year 11 students at one small rural high school in NSW. Consistent with the formal assumptions about disadvantage for rural young people by comparison to other groups within the student population in NSW or nationally, a significant number of them will leave school before completion. Their literacy and numeracy scores will be predictably similar to other small rural school students and be below or well below results for regional and urban students.

For the five years to 2008, this school's retention rate to completion of Year 12 has varied from as low as 48.3% in 2006, to an unusual high of 65.5% in 2007. The retention rate to Year 12 in 2008 was 46.5%. The retention rates were below the average for similar rural high schools in three of the five years to 2008 (Annual School Report, 2008) and in November 2009 when the research for this paper was undertaken, there were 25 Year 11 students remaining from the 43 that enrolled in 2005. Student achievement for literacy and numeracy was consistent with other small rural high schools.

The National Assessment Program- Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores for this high school were close to or below the average for statistically similar schools in all scores except the Year 7 score for Reading in 2008, which was above the average for small rural high schools (<http://www.myschool.edu.au>).

Tough Times

The issue of finding full time employment is acknowledged as a significant disadvantage for school leavers in rural areas (Robertson, 2009). During the last two decades in particular, there have been significant changes in this community's rural population, and equally significant changes in employment patterns with the move from native timber harvesting to the establishment of softwood plantations on valued farm land. The change of tenure from native forest to national parks has had no positive employment impact for local people, and the establishment of private plantation forestry on traditional farming land has been implicated in the dramatic reduction in the population of the Local Government Area (LGA), (Vincent, 2006). It is estimated that almost half the rural population of the LGA were lost to the community between 1997 and 2002 (Vincent, 2006).

This local 'industry restructuring' has coincided with protracted drought over most years of the past two decades. The 'long dry' significantly influenced the decline in livestock farming in favour of softwood timber plantings, and also forced the rationalisation of the number of livestock held on the remaining farms.

VETiS and Educational Disadvantage

A significant number of students who stay at school beyond the previous leaving age of 15, participated in Vocational Education and Training in School (VETiS) programs. These programs are often viewed by some students as being for those who don't succeed in academic subjects (Wallace, 2008). Students participate in VET subjects, seeing them as a break away from more difficult and stressful subjects, and a way to have some fun (Dalley-Trim, Alloway & Walker, 2008). There is also a view among both students and educators that VET subjects help to engage reluctant students (Wallace, 2008). The consensus nationally appears to be that VET courses are a positive option for school students, that VET credentials will advantage Australian industry in its need for a skilled work force, and help students compete in the volatile labour market of the post modernist era (Woods, 2007; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2007). VET subjects and school based apprenticeships and traineeships are strongly supported at this high school, and significant numbers of students participate in these programs from Year 10 to Year 12 (Annual School Report, 2008).

Concern that rural young people may be excluded from employment opportunities presented by the globalising of industry and trade has been added to the list of ways rural communities, rural industries and rural young people, may largely miss the chance to share the wealth produced by the "knowledge-based production that global capitalism demands" (Alston and Kent, 2003: 5). Rural young people, are recognisably disadvantaged by restricted access to tertiary education, and thus most at risk of becoming marginalised because they do not have the credentials to access the wealth industries of knowledge management and information technology (Down, 1996).

The implication of these issues for rural educators has been significant during the post modern era, as industry de regulation and global trade policies have redefined rural socio economic landscapes. In NSW, access to vocational education options for high school students has been seen as an appropriate way to enhance the chances of rural young people during their transition from school to employment in volatile and restricted rural labour markets (Squires, 2000).

The acquisition of skills to national accreditation standards to meet the needs of industry becomes problematic, especially for rural young people when they are faced with volatile and limited local employment opportunities. This is especially so in this community where agriculture and forestry are the main employer industries and these do not provide local young people with the job opportunities or choices to match their VET skills. Labour is routinely imported from elsewhere for the planting and harvesting of the softwood, and the locally depressed livestock industries offer few employment choices, and fewer chances to use the skills gained through the VETiS subjects.

The assumptions that support VETiS programs in NSW, do not properly address these locally relevant issues (McGrath, 2007), or the economic reality that many Australian jobs have been transferred overseas as industry seeks lower employment costs, rather than skills acquisition (Down, 2009).

Social change in rural places brought about by globalising forces and the complex and diverse nature of rural communities, produces a perplexing array of issues for rural educators. What is largely missing in education for rural young people is an approach that disassociates rural education objectives and policies from the perceived inequities of the spatial, demographic, social and cultural differences that exist between rural and urban locations (Green, 2008). An appreciation of the diversities of rural cultures and spaces, and the potential for 'local' values to contribute to a theoretical framework for education design for rural students, remains elusive (Brennan, 2005). The drawing together of the social, spacial and socio-economic disadvantages, to build a profile for describing these disadvantages in education, confines discussion about rural education research and delivery, to what it is *not*. The education system that is, is the one designed and delivered for the students of those places where population densities and employment opportunities measurably provide social, spacial and economic advantages.

Participants and Perspectives

How do the staff members at this small rural high school seek to improve the transitional choices and chances of its students? What influences student choices and chances about completing school and their plans to move to further study or employment, in their home community or beyond?

In seeking the opinions of staff and students about their approaches to preparing senior students for school completion and further education and employment, separate methods were used for each group. The perspectives of the school staff were accessed and evaluated through the school documents that related to the school plans and programs, and the school principal and the careers teacher were each interviewed. The staff interview data was analysed to find any connections or disconnections with the documentary data, and the staff results were evaluate against the opinions of the Year 11 students. The student perspectives about their transitional prospects were assessed by evaluating their views as these were produced during Focus Group interviews and the *From School to Further Education or Work* survey.

The separate sets of data from the staff and the students was analysed to understand both the significance of local community influences on this school, and the differences or similarities in the opinions and perspectives of the two participant groups. The assessment of the results also sought to uncover the extent to which students acknowledged the programs the school staff designed and delivered to enhance student chances of achieving their post school goals.

Their School

The high school is the only one in the LGA of 4 000 square kilometres, and the approximately 180 students who attend the school are from widely dispersed farming families, those who live in one of three small villages, or in the town itself. There are approximately 1 500 people in the town, and about half as many in the rural area. Many students travel significant distances to attend the school. From 2009, the high school was placed on the Priority Schools Program in addition to the

Country Areas program. The school also receives financial assistance through Australian Government Exceptional Circumstances drought relief payments.

Isolation

The High School Plan 2009-2010, identifies 'isolation' as important when considering the needs of students through to the Higher School Certificate (HSC), and defines its "overcoming isolation strategy" as including excursions and visits programs and student exchange programs. In the school year, 2009, the Community Newsletter reported that 15 excursions were made by the school's students to almost as many destinations. The School Plan has also prioritised technology "to overcome isolation and to provide the best learning opportunities for all students" (High School Plan, 2009). It sees that technology provides students with the opportunity to broaden their range of subject choice, and the staff also plan to give them access to outside teaching and learning resources and specialist subject assistance through partnership programs with neighbouring high schools.

Technology was identified as a tool for overcoming isolation through subject choice, but was also seen to provide a level of equity in provision to isolated students because technology for this school's students was as accessible and of the same standard as for high school students elsewhere.

During the interview with the Principal, he produced a social perspective about isolation when asked about the School Plan and the ways in which it acknowledged the rurality of the students and their community. He explained it this way:

We do make an effort to have kids going on social and cultural visits as much as we can and that ensures that they have as much exposure to the world and they have an international view of things. Whenever any opportunities come up we try to take them because we want the kids to develop their view... another problem we do have here in this little community is that it is essentially a white Anglo Saxon community. In terms of non English speaking background in the students we have zero. Typically in a Sydney school community they have 40% ... and a lot of larger country towns as well. The other thing too - in terms of being a rural community - we make a fair bit of effort to try to connect with the local community and try and work closely with them and make sure there are a lot of connections between people.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) and School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT)

The staff at this school have designed and implemented extensive VET and SBAT programs as a result of their perceptions that the community, local industry and the students would each benefit from an improved and extended VET curriculum at the school. These perceptions are an acknowledgement of the isolation and the low socio economic status of the LGA. The school documents that refer to VET and SBAT programs, including the Application for funding from the Trade Training Centres In Schools Program (Application, 2008), are a clear acceptance that the school is obliged to provide students with the educational

opportunities that will allow them to stay in their community, and also provide local industry with skilled employees. In the complex set of relationships between the school, its immediate community, and the expectations of the wider community represented by the bureaucracies of education service providers, the delivery of VET and SBAT programs is seen in this high school as being central to this set of relationships.

In the School Plan area that focuses on "providing its students with excellent opportunities for careers, vocational and further education", VET is seen as essential for the development of these opportunities, and the school focus is on developing and expanding VET choices within the school.

The Facility for Industry Training (FIT), to be built in the high school grounds, has been the focus for improving access to VET, and expanding the number of VET courses available to students. The documents associated with the application for funding for the Facility, are saturated with the discourse about disadvantage, emphasising the school's isolation, the low socio economic status of the LGA, and poor student completion rates to Year 12.

It is crucial to acknowledge in the analysis of the documents for the application for funding for the FIT, that these were subject to the values and assumptions made about the application process and the expectations of the selection criteria. Such acknowledgement though does not detract from, nor reduce the perceived importance of disadvantage that is central to the design and delivery of the school's VET and SBAT programs. It is also clear that the intentions and purposes that underpin the school documents emphasise the issues of isolation and the impacts of the community's low socio economic status. This emphasis appears to substantiate the design of the programs that are delivered to prepare the high school students for making their choices about post school education and employment.

Student Perspectives

The Year 11 students of this study have already made one important decision about their life choices. They each have passed the milestone of the minimum leaving age of 15. They have chosen to stay at school while many of their peers have already left to attend schools elsewhere or to take or seek employment locally or away. The perspectives of these young people are centred by their decisions to go from their community or to stay after they leave school. For those who choose to leave their local community to seek further education and training, some do so with the thought they will return one day. Those who decide to stay, also do so for very personal reasons, and take the view that to stay is enough. They each have identified what is positive about living and working in a familiar place, they acknowledged their attachment to family and friends, and they are not excited by thoughts of what they might find in the world beyond.

The interview and survey data produced the view that the choice to complete school was made through a complex and unique critique of their own capacities and chances of successfully attaining their goals. They generally saw school completion as necessary for them to attain the credential of the HSC. This was especially so for those students who had made the decision to leave the community after school completion. This decision to leave home was crucial to the transitional pathway

choice they had made, and the decision to leave their community, at least for some time, was related to their view of what was available in another town or city rather than what was lacking in their own community. Each student interviewed, produced an assessment of themselves, and they believed it was this that was the main reason for their choice about school completion, and the pathway they planned to take after they left school.

John, alone of the Year 11 participants, had decided on employment in his home community. He did not have any interest in further education, and he believed that he would take whatever work he could. He accepted that his chances of finding work depended on whether or not he was prepared to take what was on offer and equally on his assessment that he was not suited to further education. This, and his choice to stay close to his family, was the main motivations for his choice of transitional pathway. School completion was important primarily because he had undertaken an agricultural traineeship, and he was also prepared to complete a VET course in automotive engineering by the end of Year 12. He was not sure whether he would ever seek or find employment using his automotive qualification, but he had decided that agriculture was the local industry that held the most appeal for him. John was comfortable with his choice, and was confident that his local knowledge and his agricultural traineeship, coupled with this preparedness to "have a go" would lead him into employment in his home community.

Lisa, like John, did not see herself as being capable of following an academic pathway after school completion, but she saw the HSC as a necessary credential for gaining a place as a cadet in the nearest Police Academy. She liked the idea of being a veterinary surgeon, but accepted that she did not have the ability to gain entry to university. She conceded that she would have to leave home to undertake a period of training, but she hoped that she would eventually return as a qualified police officer. For the term of her police training, she hoped to be able to travel home often.

Alison's and Mick's choices to complete school were also related to the way they assessed their identities, and to their interests and aptitudes. Alison, growing up in a small rural village and with a background that had seen her always in close contact with farm animals and the people who worked with them, wanted to become a veterinary surgeon. She believed her best chance was to be accepted as a rural student at a regional university. She, like Lisa wanted to eventually return home. She wanted to establish her own veterinary practice. Her choice was based on the conviction that she would only be happy in employment that suited her interests and background, though she conceded that she would need to achieve well in the HSC to even gain entry to the provincial university of her choice.

Mick's interest and passion was music. Members of his family are musicians, and he is confident that his musical focus and abilities will lead him to a place that is very different to the one he is living in now. His decision to complete school is based on expediency, his perception of himself as a musician and ultimately working with those family members who are also musicians. Mick does not identify with this rural place in any way, and he is discontented and disappointed that the high school does not offer him better choices for his musical education. His interest in music dominates his thinking about his post school pathway as well as his view of

the community in which he lives. He wants to be able to leave the community, and focus on his musical training elsewhere.

Emma is a mature age student, a single mother whose reasons for being a Year 11 student are much the same as her very much younger classmates. She is seeking the credential of the HSC to help her find employment so that she can support herself and her young family. Her reasons for being at school are personal and reflect her assessment of her chances for a better life after she completes school. She has produced a vision of her future, and is preparing for her transition to a world of work that she sees as presently being out of her reach. She, like Mick, does not identify with the community she lives in, and she will be glad to move to another place, after completing school.

Disappointment

The Year 11 students focused on their individual interests and aptitudes, and they were disappointed by the school's incapacity to provide them with the assistance they saw as being necessary for them to successfully fulfil their plans for further education and employment. Alison, Mick and Sally wanted to go on to further education, and were all critical of the lack of subject choice at their school. Mick was especially disaffected because he felt he was missing out on important opportunities to extend his musical training and because he was unable to be with people who shared his level of interest and ability.

Alison found it very difficult to study a subject by distance education. She was very committed to employment in agriculture, and was the only student enrolled in this subject in her year. Alison said that she thought that the school hadn't wanted her to study the subject, and though her teachers helped whenever when she asked for it, she saw this subject as her own responsibility. Sally, who wanted to study medicine or law, was frustrated and angry that no one could help her decide which subjects she should study for her further education choices, and she felt she had to take sole responsibility for these choices.

John was also critical of the level of help he received, especially when he had applied for his traineeship. He hadn't known what was involved in the application process to move from his part time job to an agricultural traineeship with his employer. Like his fellow students, he felt that while the school staff responded to his requests for help, no one "followed up" to see how students were progressing with 'outside' programs like traineeships or distance education subjects.

The nineteen Year 11 students, who completed the *From School to Further Education or Work* survey, reaffirmed the views of the Focus Group participants. The school programs and activities, designed by the staff to help students formulate and achieve their transitional choices, had had little influence on their decision to complete Year 12 or on and their post school choices. The table below shows that for eight of the nineteen survey participants, none of the special events, programs or activities that the school had organised, had helped them make their post school choices.

Table 1: Name school events, programs and activities that would help you choose a career or find a job.

Response Comments	No. of Comments	Percentage of Comments
None	8	32
Careers days	7	28
Work experience, work placement	5	20
Excursions and Activities	4	16
VET/TAFE	1	4
Total	25	100

The perceptions about the ways their high school influenced these Year 11 students in their transitional choices, was not simply disaffection for the school. They saw themselves as being responsible for their choices, and responsible for seeking help from the school staff when they needed it. Alison and Sally both recognised that the small size of the school, and the distance of their community from a major city, contributed to the lack of opportunities and resources that the school could offer. Lisa agreed, and felt that they simply had to work harder to overcome these disadvantages.

Mick and Emma did not concede the view that the small size and isolation of the school impacted on their subject choices, or the capacity of the school staff to deliver more significant programs to help them prepare for their transition to further education and employment. The disaffection they felt was related to their perception that their teachers lacked the interest and understanding to help them.

Our Place

The view of community held by the Year 11 participants is as complex as their feelings about the school. For the young people whose families have a long association within the community, their perceptions relating to valued interconnections were compelling. John's perspective that his family are "all in this town" was the primary motivation for him to stay and accept whatever employment was available. His choice to participate in an agricultural traineeship rather than to leave, mirrored his sense of connection with family and community and his related personal preference for local employment. His choice to stay was a positive one for his rural identity, and a rejection of the family global lure that Mick identified in his choice to go.

For Lisa and Alison, the rural local connection was also strong, but they each identified that to secure the transitional pathway of their choice, they must, for a time at least, put aside their valued family and community connections. They had chosen a pathway to gain access to further training and education, knowing that they must accept leaving, at least for some time. Rather poignantly, Alison spoke of her trepidation about moving away, but accepted that it was something that rural young people simply had to get used to. Knowing others who had left their community to fulfil their transitional ambitions and who had subsequently returned home to live and work, was a great reassurance for her.

The perceptions that both the staff and students shared was in the theme of disadvantage that each group and its individual participants returned to time and again. All participants easily expressed what it was that was lacking in their small, isolated community. The students recognised that their school could not offer a wide range of subject choice, and that there were only three main areas of employment opportunity they identified if they chose to stay after school completion - the softwood processing mill, agriculture and the town itself. The students understood why school staff encouraged them to leave their community, for at least a time after school completion. Sally and Alison acknowledged that it would be easier to stay, but Sally was prepared to forego her "gap" year, just in case she lost her resolve to leave and continue her education.

The student participants of this study consistently accepted that it was *their* responsibility to identify their transitional pathway choices, and many of them also clearly expressed that their chances were best enhanced by their own endeavours and determination to succeed. It was also clear though, that they felt disconnected from the educational directions their school was taking, and disappointed in their teachers' attempts to help them prepare for further study or employment.

Table 2: In what ways has your school helped you prepare for employment and further education.

Response Comments	No. of Comments	Percentage of Comments
No help	10	50
Careers days	4	20
Excursions and Activities	3	15
VET/TAFE	2	10
Work experience, work placement	1	5
Total:	20	100

Choices and Chances

The participant students in this study were clearly aware of the disadvantages they saw as implicating them through their own educational opportunities at this high school. They understood that their subject choices were limited by comparison to their urban counterparts, enrolled as some of them were in subjects by distance education. They also understood, as Alison did, that her best chance for her further education choice was to gain entrance to a provincial university.

They don't help enough ... (Lisa, Year 11)

... they don't help enough because we're .. so far away from a major city or whatever .. we don't have all those resources just ... there. (Sally, Year 11)

Being such a small school I find that we lack opportunities sometimes .. like .. (Alison, Year 11)

Yeah .. (Lisa, Year 11)

... doing distance ed. with ag. and ... really it would be better if our school offered it to people instead of out of school and try to find it yourself and fix yourself up for it. (Alison, Year 11).

The disaffection felt by Year 11 student participants as revealed by this study, was considerable. They shared an unease about their subject choices, in spite of the VET focus in the high school plan and its attention to issues about disadvantage. Programs like work experience were seen by students as due to their own individual endeavours to find part time work. Many of them appreciated the programs the school offered, but did not acknowledge these as being as important as their own aptitudes, the influences of family and friends, and the people they met at their part time work places or during Work Experience.

Within the context of the programs and experiences offered to students by their high school, this disaffection was clearly voiced during the Focus Group interviews and in the *From School to Further Education or Work* survey. In the words of one female survey participant, when asked how her school could help prepare students for further study or employment, she answered that "they should spend more time with us, listen and help". A male participant wrote "teach us what we NEED to know", and yet another male participant simply answered the question by writing "TALK TO US!"

SUMMARY

One of the most significant findings of this study is, that despite the implementation by the staff at this high school of an extensive range of programs and activities that focus on VET and employment preparation, the Year 11 student participants did not acknowledge these programs as having any *significant* influence on their choice to complete to Year 12 or on their further education and employment choices. None of the student participants discussed the expansion of the VET programs that the school planned through the construction of a Facility for Industry Training on the school campus, and only one student acknowledged VET as a school program that would help them "choose a career or find a job" (see Table 1.).

The perspectives of the school staff, described through the high school's plans and programs, and the students' view of these programs, revealed a disturbing disconnection between the perspectives of the staff and students. Each group had distinctly different perceptions about what influenced rural young people in their preparation for transition from school to a familiar life in a small rural community, or to a life in the unknown global spaces beyond.

The evidence that this high school has designed its plan and programs to comply with the formal recommendations about VETiS in particular (Squires, 2000), and the notion that VET studies provide improved choices for rural high school students (Wallace, 2008; Griffin and Curtin, 2007), is revealed in its plan and programs that acknowledge the need to redress rural disadvantage. The rejection by the Year 11 students, that this school's plan and programs significantly influenced their decisions about school completion and their transitional choices, brings into focus the relevance of measured rural disadvantage in education design for rural students.

BEYOND RURAL DISADVANTAGE

The disaffection the students feel about their school, and the fact that its plans and programs focus on formal evaluations about disadvantage, challenges the school's approach to meeting the needs of these rural young people, and especially challenges their focus on VETiS. The general discussion about disadvantage has also very clearly seeped into student perceptions about their choices and chances. Ideas about advantage are missing from the student's appraisals of their school and post school choices and chances. There was no evidence that the staff had considered that there might be advantages in the characteristics of 'smallness' and 'remoteness' as these apply to this rural community and its high school. These might be about knowing particular rural values and ethics, about having particular social, cultural and natural resources, and about interacting with natural landscapes to gain life enhancing experiences, opportunities, knowledges and attributes. Disadvantage was clearly defined and entrenched in the evaluations of both staff and student participants in this study, and it is apparent that here at least, advantage in rural education is yet to be defined for its rural students.

A recognisably rural approach to the design of education for rural young people might produce significantly better outcomes for them, their communities, and global interests. This implies at least in part, a local rather than purely a state or national focus, and the replacement of a mass education system with one that meets the needs of particular groups in society rather than the needs of globally focused industry standards and requirements. This 'about face', implies a more holistic approach to curriculum design for rural education that might include humanism and constructivist theory and practice (McGrath, 2007). Such an approach, coupled with the imperatives for the recruitment of, and support for teachers in rural schools (Green, 2008), might finally bring to rural students and their communities, education reform that delivers the redress to education disadvantage that has so persistently eluded education providers, and the rural communities they serve.

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