University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

2019

'Learning to leave' or 'striving to stay': Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Sarah Elizabeth O'Shea

University of Wollongong, sarah.oshea@curtin.edu.au

Erica Southgate

University of Newcastle

Ann Jardine

University of New South Wales

Janine Delahunty

University of Wollongong, janined@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers>

Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

'Learning to leave' or 'striving to stay': Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Abstract

This article presents an examination of how rural young people contemplate their post-schooling futures and how understandings of mobility inform this decision making. While the 'push' and 'pull' of rural living has been documented in the literature, rarely has this drawn on the combined perspectives of rural high school students and teachers. Drawing upon interviews and video transcripts created with rural young people and combined with teacher focus groups, this article provides nuanced insight into the complex and negotiated nature of decisions, desires and dreams about life after school. The data has been drawn from a research project that worked with young people to document their educational and professional aspirations post-schooling. Utilising a digital story methodology, this study created both visual and textual representations of shifts and how these choices were understood at a deeply personal level.

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

O'Shea, S., Southgate, E., Jardine, A. & Delahunty, J. (2019). 'Learning to leave' or 'striving to stay': Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 32 100587-1-100587-8.

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Citation: O’Shea, S., Southgate, E., Jardine, A., & Delahunty, J. (2019). ‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures. *Emotion, Space and Society*. Volume 32 (1-8)

Abstract

This article presents an examination of how rural young people contemplate their post-schooling futures and how understandings of mobility inform this decision making. While the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ of rural living has been documented in the literature, rarely has this drawn on the combined perspectives of rural high school students and teachers. Drawing upon interviews and video transcripts created with rural young people and combined with teacher focus groups, this article provides nuanced insight into the complex and negotiated nature of decisions, desires and dreams about life after school. The data has been drawn from a research project that worked with young people to document their educational and professional aspirations post-schooling. Utilising a digital story methodology, this study created both visual and textual representations of shifts and how these choices were understood at a deeply personal level.

Key words: Rural youth; post-schooling transitions; mobility ; digital storytelling

Introduction

Corbett’s (2007) seminal work ‘Learning to Leave’ explored how young people, living outside urban environments, were often differentiated based on their decisions to ‘leave’ or ‘stay’ in their community or locale. While Corbett explored ‘who stays, who goes and why’ (p.4) in a small remote Canadian coastal community, the study outlined in this article focuses on Australian rural youth from communities in central New South Wales as they contemplated their post-schooling destinies. Considering life beyond the ‘school gate’ is challenging for many young people but for those located in rural and remote environments, available options

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

may be imbued with additional complex undertones. Such decisions exist beyond policy discourse or funding prerogatives and need to be situated within the context of place and space, negotiated within the actual ‘emotional geographies’ (Ahmed, 2004) that young people exist within. Too often the vision of rural or remote is a romanticized one; nowhere is that more obvious than Australia where the outback landscape is iconic and the ideology of ‘Aussie battler’ resonates with sacrifices demanded by the land. However, communities outside regional or city hubs have many challenges, often related to the particular economic, cultural and educational dynamics that exist in rural or remote settings.

This paper aims to point out tensions for rural young people as they consider their educational and vocational futures whilst negotiating connections with family, the land and their community. Drawing upon a range of methodologies (digital stories, interviews and focus groups) involving both young people and their teachers, this article does not seek to present generalisable findings but rather a detailed focus on the ‘lived experience’ of rurality and the intricacies of making post-schooling choices in a particular set of communities in rural Australia. Conceptually, this research is informed by a mix of literature and research from the disciplines of educational sociology and human geography. This is a diverse combination but one we feel does justice to the rich data provided by the participants. Decisions to ‘stay’ or ‘leave’ are multi-layered and complex. This article seeks to frame these within broader understandings of mobility, paying particular attention to hidden emotional and relational connotations such decisions engender, which often remain ill-defined.

The next section provides a review of literature that considers the notion of mobility as conceived within a rural context, followed by discussion of how this ‘mobility’ underpins broader discourses related to higher education¹ (HE) participation in Australia.. Consideration is then given to the emotional undertones of such decisions.

¹ We define higher education (HE) as both private and public university providers who are degree conferring.

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Mobility and rurality

‘Mobility is a defining element of the modern condition...regardless of geographic location, many people exercise mobility’ (Morse & Mudgett, 2018, p.262).

Increasing levels and forms of mobility have led to the emergence of what has been termed a ‘mobility paradigm’ or ‘mobility turn’ within social sciences (Coulter, van Ham & Findlay, 2015). This paradigm theorises that mobility is situated centrally within structures of power, identity creation as well as ‘the micro geographies of everyday life’ (Cresswell, 2011, p.551). Yet our knowledge of ‘short-distance residential mobility and immobility’ has attracted less close-up scholarly attention than international migration behaviours (Coulter, et al., 2015, p.352). Local mobility is described as situated within finer ‘relational practice’ rather than ‘discrete transitions’ linked to the life course (Coulter et al, 2015, p.358). Understanding the complex nature of such internal movement or migration, requires focus to shift from solely economic or fiscal motivations towards ‘show[ing] greater appreciation of the “non-economic issues of migration”’ (Rerat, 2014, p.124).

The assumption that social, and thus geographic, mobility is within easy reach for young rural people is problematic (Erikson, Sanders, & Cope, 2018). Mobility is an ‘ontological absolute’ (Holt, 2008) for country youth and leaving requires complex ‘negotiations of home and belonging’ (Farmer, 2017, p.250). This is particularly the case within Australia, where distance remains a key mediating factor for people from rural regions contemplating their educational and vocational futures. As Cuervo (2014) explains ‘(d)istance and time are perennial themes faced daily by people in rural communities’ (p.550). This is echoed by Corbett (2016) who argues that neoliberal discourses of social mobility emphasise futures which essentially devalue the local and the regional, celebrating instead the desired nature of the urban. Such demarcations result in situations where the ‘rural is marginalized, devalued, disadvantaged and problematic in this discourse’ (Corbett, 2016, p.41), a discourse that largely constrains the growth and development of rural and remote areas.

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

A dichotomy also exists around perceptions of young people’s movements out of rural areas. On the one hand, it is conceived as a ‘problematic loss of human and social capital’ (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014, p.88); a situation that creates a ‘brain drain’ for the local community. However, staying behind can equally be regarded as a form of ‘failure’, given that success is often implicitly contingent on movement (Stockdale, Theunissen & Haartsen, 2017). Increasingly, this dichotomy is being challenged by researchers who argue that decisions to ‘stay’ or ‘go’ are complex and relational (Coulter et al, 2015; Rerat, 2014; Stockdale et al, 2017). However, we have limited understanding of how young people themselves conceive of such movements and how a possible return is conceptualised and enacted (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014).

Considering mobility is particularly important within a contemporary HE environment, which has shifted globally from an elite system to one characterised by mass participation (Altbach, 2013; Marginson, 2016). This ‘widening participation’ agenda has been articulated within ‘a narrative of social mobility’ (Lehmann, 2009, p.635) implying that access to university leads to an upward trajectory for those prepared and able to embrace the opportunity. For rural young people contemplating HE, it becomes key to position oneself as ‘someone who will move’ (Holt, 2008, p.1). Movement is understood both as a geographic necessity and also essential for those who wish to access the opportunity, wealth and prestige that a university education apparently bestows (Friedman, 2014). The next section further investigates social mobility discourse and the wider implications for the rural population.

The discourse of social mobility within the HE setting

Morrison (2014) argues that the ‘value’ of HE is embedded in the discourse of mobility where universities are regarded as maximising the opportunity for ‘occupational and social mobility’ (p.180). Much understanding of social mobility is framed in terms of change and assumes that this change is inherently positive, ‘an instrumental means of achieving upward mobility, or of aspiring to “become middle class”’ (Loveday, 2015, p.1). When located within a ‘celebratory discourse’ as an

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

‘entirely progressive force’ (Friedman, 2014, p.353), the impact that mobility can have on ‘kinship ties, intimate relationships, and most significantly on the ontological coherence of the self’ (Friedman, 2014, p.354) fails to be recognised.

Embracing social mobility is a demanding act, particularly when articulated within neoliberal and progressive discourse, as Reay (2013) explains:

Social mobility is a wrenching experience. It rips working-class young people out of communities that need to hold on to them, and it rips valuable aspects of self out of the socially mobile themselves (p.667).

Yet despite this ‘wrenching nature’, educational mobility, particularly university participation, continues to be defined largely in logical and masculinist terms. Kenway and Youdell (2011) explain ‘emotion is not formally part of education’ (p.132) and so discourses of education largely favour rationality. There is often little regard for the emotional undercurrents of mobility or recognition of how places can ‘stick’ to young people (Hickey-Moody & Kenway, 2017). Also the ways that ‘subjectivities are embedded, or folded into, the local landscapes and the impact that being embedded in quite specific landscapes has on [...] biographies and understanding of their world’ (Hickey-Moody & Kenway, 2017, p.140). The next section further explores the literature around emotionality to provide a necessary backdrop to the narratives of the young people and teachers in this study.

The emotional and embodied undertones of ‘being’ mobile

In order to problematise concepts such as aspiration, access and educational choice, it is necessary to define the ‘lived experience of mobility’ (Farmer, 2017, p.266). For rural youth, the need to retain connection with the land, family and community may negotiate, and even override, the trajectory of upward social mobility. Understanding the complex emotional nature of decisions made about university and post-schooling futures can provide better insights into the relational and geographical

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

nature of university participation rather than assuming that this represents a simple choice made within a developmental discourse. Importantly, the language of emotion used by rural young people only partially reflects the embodied effects of these movements.

In this study, we hoped to open up this emotional domain and provide deeper insights into the nuances of mobility and its bodily repercussions by utilising both verbal (interviews/focus groups) and visual (digital story) mediums. The narratives of the young people do not necessarily represent a ‘conventional view of mobility that values movement for upward mobility’ (Farmer, 2017, p.258), rather these were complex journeys engendering various experiential and emotional repercussions.

By focusing on the lived experience of mobility articulated by those located in the very ‘maelstrom’ of crucial decisions to ‘stay’ or ‘go’, we endeavoured to explore the various pulls and pushes that post-schooling decisions engender. This is complex and difficult work that can sometimes be overlooked when focus is predominantly on mobility rates. To foreground this complexity, we adopted a digital story methodology, outlined next.

The research project

This study explored how young people (Year 11 students) in regional and rural communities conceptualised their post-schooling futures and how these enactments were translated by teachers. Theoretically, the project was informed by social constructionism which recognises that meaning is not derived in isolation but rather constructed via reference to social and personal concepts or frameworks; interpretations are continually developed, defined and modified through interaction. Social constructionists seek to comprehend the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it (Schwandt, 1994). Digital storytelling is one way for young people to reflect upon the meaning of mobility within their rural context as well as the implications of this shift (or potential shift) both for themselves and their communities. Digital stories are short videos narrated in the first-

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

person on topics of significance to the creator (Williams, Gott, et al., 2017). Each story can include text, music, photographs and original artworks (Treffry-Goatley, Lessells, et al., 2016).

Digital storytelling is an emerging and powerful qualitative research tool supporting the goals of participatory and inclusive research (Williams et al., 2017). We adopted this approach in recognition that it can alter power relationships between the researchers and the researched (Parsons, Guldberg, Porayska-Pomsta, & Lee, 2015) by offering ‘marginalised groups a means for expressing alternative voices that can be absent or misrepresented by mainstream discourse’ (Williams et al., 2017, p.7). We also deliberately sought a youth-focused methodology that would be meaningful to participants, provide new skills (i.e. editing and scripting) and ‘represent experiences that are inadequately captured in verbal interview and text alone’ (De Jager et al., 2017, p.2573).

Recruitment

Participants were Year 11 students and teachers from rural/remote schools attending a four-day workshop themed *ASPIRing for my/our future* conducted by a university outreach program that works with schools in rural and regional areas to assist students to map out their post-schooling objectives (vocational and educational). Students were recruited via their schools with parental consents returned to the schools prior to the workshop. Teachers (n= 8) were recruited during the workshop and asked to participate in a focus group. This choice of methodology was deliberate as all the teachers knew each other and so a focus group was deemed a ‘safe’ and informal approach to data collection.

The schools involved were secondary (for students from Year 7 to Year 12) or ‘central’ (combining Kindergarten through to Year 12). To contextualise the environments Table (1) details the schools and the relative socio-economic setting for each, in relation to Australian school averages:

TABLE ONE NEAR HERE

The Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage* (ICSEA) is based on parental education and occupation (ACARA, 2018) and is set at an average of 1000. Table 1 indicates that all eight schools

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

fall under the ICSEA average by varying degrees (from 961 down to 659). The lower the ICSEA value, the lower the level of educational advantage of students attending that school. Similarly, the higher the ICSEA value, the higher the level of educational advantage. Students falling into the bottom quartile of socio-economic advantage are over-represented in all schools and under-represented in the top quartile. These statistics point to the diverse nature of the rural school sites and that learners are often intersected by issues related to social and economic disadvantage and also, generational educational biographies.

Data

There were 26 digital stories and transcribed narrations collected from Year 11 students (nine female and 17 male). Two of the four days focussed on digital storytelling with instruction and support provided through an independent and not for profit organization (Digital Storytellers) with the research project running alongside. The first day’s session (3 hours) included guidance on planning, filming and creating a digital story. Links to copyright free resources (e.g. images, music) were also provided. In developing the digital stories, students were guided by prompts such as: *If you could choose anything – what would you love to do when you finish school? Explain if this is different from what you actually see yourself doing and why. What is helping or could help you achieve your goals?* The videos were interspersed with ‘cutaway’ shots, a ‘hero’ shot (representative of what their future looks like) and time-lapse drawings. While the students had access to iPads, the digital storytelling approach also allowed them to use their own devices to immediately access copyright-free images and music (links were provided). At the end of the second day’s session (2 hours) students uploaded their completed digital stories to an online repository and were invited to write their names on a whiteboard if they were willing for their video to be shown at the celebratory event at the end of the day. This celebratory viewing is a key characteristic of the digital storytelling approach; a small theatre was used to to showcase the stories and students were able to introduce or comment on these after presentation. The focus in this article is on the narrated or spoken data; analysis of the visual material will be the focus of another publication.

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Interviews were conducted with 15 of these students (four female and 11 male); these interviews were conducted informally alongside the digital story workshop sessions, enabling participants to further reflect and expand upon their digital texts. Questions ranged from those designed to consider experiences of education through to expectations and desires for the future. Additionally, eight teachers (six were female and two male) from seven participating schools agreed to participate in the focus group. Teachers were encouraged to reflect upon the types of barriers student encountered in achieving post-schooling ambitions as well as consider the schools’ and their own roles in facilitating these goals. *Questions asked included: ‘What kind of career options are available for young people in their locality?’ ‘What types of post-schooling ambitions do young people articulate?’ ‘What are the types of barriers encountered to attaining a job or attending university?’*

All data collection occurred during the four-day workshops. Table (2) provides summary details of the data:

TABLE TWO NEAR HERE

Data were not specifically collected on the age or racial/ethnic background of participants, as the focus of the research was their perceived futures beyond schooling. In general however, the ages of Year 11 students range from 16 to 17 years.

Transcripts of the interviews, focus group and digital story scripts underwent independent line-by-line analysis of the texts by each team member. Themes derived from this analysis were discussed and collectively studied to develop a series of overarching or global themes. All transcripts were then imported into the QSR NVivo11 program with the lead investigator conducting inductive analysis across all the data to validate the emergent themes and also, to consider alternative interpretations of the data. Following consultation, a total of nineteen themes were identified. This article focuses on

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

those relating to issues of mobility and choice within this specific rural context, which is described next.

Setting: Developing a sense of place

Geographically, the schools were located in the Central West region of New South Wales (NSW).

This covers an area of approximately 63,000 sq km and accounts for approximately 9% of the total land area of NSW, yet has less than 3% of the population. Main industries are farming related with some manufacturing and tourism related businesses in the towns. Examining educational outcomes, the population is far less likely than the population of the state overall to complete the final year (Year 12) of schooling (35.5% compared with 52%) or go on to complete a Bachelor degree (9.4% compared with 16%). Employment outcomes appear to be similar to the state outcomes, although the median household income is approximately 17% less than the state overall (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016). In terms of location, the ABS divides Australia into five geographic classes depending on the level of ‘access’ to key services such as health and educational services (ABS, 2016). The locations involved in this study are regarded as ‘outer regional’ and ‘remote’, meaning that access to essential services ranged from ‘moderate’ (outer regional) through to ‘highly’ restrictive (remote). However, neither statistics nor relative access to services adequately depict the sense of the place that participants resided within, thus a more nuanced description of these settings follows.

The Central West, like much of NSW, has been heavily hit by drought which has ravaged the farming communities for several years and continues to do so as Australia moves towards a major El Nino weather event. The effect of prolonged drought is drastic and pervasive, with ongoing impacts on farmers and their families. This had led to families rostering their children off school for the labour-intensive work of hand feeding stock, or senior students having to juggle study with the need to be home and help look after properties.

Drought is not the only extreme weather condition experienced in these communities. For example, one part of this region was hit by major floods which closed some schools for several days, while

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

another part was severely damaged by major bush fires which also disrupted school attendance and resulted in the loss of stock, land and homes. Managing multiple events caused by our harsh and increasingly volatile Australian climate speaks to the resilience and tenacity of the people in these communities. Importantly, it speaks to the resilience of the students in the study working towards their imagined post school futures.

Findings

For any young person, the decision to attend university or move away for employment is multi-layered and complex but this is often heightened for those from rural and remote communities. The following sections provide details of how the young people themselves considered issues of mobility under three overarching themes. The first ‘growing up rural’ situates the participants within their rural homeplace and explores how this is understood by both the young people and also the teachers within the community. The second theme ‘learning to leave’ explores the dialectic between personal aspirations and requisite departure, whilst the final theme ‘striving to stay’ indicates how these young people reflected upon expected trajectories and how these assumed destinies required straddling, sometimes uncomfortably, spatial and emotional landscapes.

Growing up rural: The dynamics of town and country settings

...something that gets in the way would probably end up being moving away. I

don't really want to move to a bigger place; I like the country.

(Kaleb, Acaciaville High)

This section sets out how confluence of emotional dynamics of life stage (time), place, self, and belonging all impact on a sense of place in order to counter representations of rurality which largely draw upon statistics and broad demographics. We consider how mobility is understood at a personal level as these young people conveyed diverse and revealing descriptions of living in rural communities. For example, two of the students provided the following insights:

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Yeah, with the smaller community, everyone knows everyone but most people know you for who you are, not for what other people want you to be. (Mason, Wheatfields High)

A lot of the conveniences that you take for granted in [REGIONAL CITY], they're not there; you get a lot more freedom with the outside things that you can do because it's literally just a walk away... (Rhys, Lachlanwest High)

Rather than focus on the deficit value of this environment, both reflections include positive aspects of growing up rural. Mason and Rhys recognise the differences in access to services and related opportunities within their rural locale but this is contextualised by their own experience of growing up there. Such multiplicity is key to understanding these environments, which cannot be defined solely in singular or mono-dimensional terms.

While details about their respective towns were presented in somewhat cursory detail, this was often insightful in terms of its simplicity. For example, Wyatt (Valley Central) described his town as ‘probably ... about 1,000 people in it’ with the town and farming demarcated by one main road - the town buildings ‘to the left of the main road and all the farming’s out to the right.’ Wyatt’s description was echoed by others who described similar hidden or invisible boundaries within their communities. Indeed, understanding ‘growing up rural’ must also consider that a ‘town dweller’, a ‘farm kid’ or both, are diverse experiences, each with its own connotations and associated milieu.

Those who resided on farming properties described lives punctuated by manual work such as feeding animals, shearing and managing large acreages. These are busy and demanding lives with ‘adult-like’ responsibility. Kayla (Acaciaville Central) explained that she was currently managing one property, as her parents had employment and caring commitments that kept them in town. She candidly explained what this responsibility entailed:

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

I’m usually at the farm by myself a lot, just doing the jobs and that. I’ll do the cooking, cleaning and I’ll just feed the dogs and check stock and that. It’s like say the other day, I got home on Saturday from netball and there was about two dead sheep, just died for no reason basically – they just dropped dead because of stress or something. I don’t know. I had to cut one open just to see if it swallowed any string.

While Kayla’s story is quite unique, other participants described a life replete with responsibilities. This was often coupled with an expectation that some would continue farming as generations before them:

I also see myself taking over the family farm because no-one else would do that otherwise. (Ryder, Tibiah South Central)

A lot of students their entire life will be told ‘so when you take over the farm’ since they were like about 5 years old and at 18 ‘I’m taking over the farm.’ (Teacher#1, Acaciaville Central)

However, the busy nature of farm life is often in stark contrast to the town dwellers. The rhythms of the day differed for this group, who sometimes struggled to fill the spare time. Town kids such as Kate and Wyatt recognised the differences in activity choices available to them compared to their farming counterparts:

Well, since we’re in such a small town, we’ve really got the pool but that’s closed during winter time and we’ve got the park but no-one goes to the park and there’s the pub but you can’t go to the pub. That’s all we’ve got ... so basically you’ve got to be inside ... if you’ve got an internet connection, you’re fine but if you don’t, it’s pretty... unless you work on a farm or something, then you’d have stuff to do but yeah. (Kate, Acaciaville Central)

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

if your mum or dad or your family owns a property or something, you’ve pretty much got something to do on the weekends and after school and stuff but otherwise, find a job, do that every afternoon after school and keep doing that. (Wyatt, Valley Central)

Maddie (Rivertown Central) living in a small town, admitted to feeling ‘*lonely because it’s a very, very, very small place. It’s very isolated from everything so you get very bored easily*’, she described her weekend activities as involving:

walking down to the old railway roads and just look around there and hang around there. That’s about the only fun ... Or, if it’s summer, we go to the pool but other than that, there’s nothing.

For those who were able to venture beyond the town, like Jayden, there were other opportunities such as ‘*camping*’, ‘*tubing*’ and exploring the ‘*bush to just go for walks in*’. A number of participants lived both in town and on the land. This was often an economic necessity with family members supplementing their income by working in the town during the week and farming on the weekends. Many farms were family businesses, so the expectation was that everyone lent a hand to ensure sustainability.

The teachers similarly reflected on the differential between town/farm residency status. Such reflections were predominantly around life post-schooling and students’ indicative life style. For example, one teacher described different attitudes to attending university based on farm or town residency status:

rural kids come from that background, they have land outside of town, they have more of an idea and have a bit more of a go, whereas the town kids that don’t

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

come from a family of academics or having been encouraged, like you say. Yeah, no, they think they’re just nowhere good enough to do that [attend university] ...

(Teacher#7, Valley Central)

The perception that town kids and farm kids differed in attitudes to their educational abilities or options was echoed by another teacher:

I think tackling the issue of getting farming kids to university is very different to tackling the issues of getting non-farming kids who are rural to uni. They’re two different problems... (Teacher#4, Gowenville Central)

While popular discourse largely portrays the rural in universal terms, our data spoke to a setting comprised of subtle diversity. The next section further explores this diversity in terms of how young people and teachers considered life beyond school.

Learning to leave

It’s like [the town]’s in its own little bubble and it’s really hard to get them out of that bubble.

(Teacher#4, Gowenville Central)

There was no shortage of ambition or aspiration amongst the Year 11 students who participated in this study. Goals after schooling were diverse but clearly articulated, ranging from pursuing a trade, being a pilot, training horses right through to becoming a pediatrician or a criminologist. Many of the students outlined the process for achieving these ambitions and despite their relative youth had clearly considered these futures in some depth:

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

I wanted to do something sportsy, like sports science or even be a physio because I'm pretty interested in working with the body (Quentin, Lachlanwest High)

After high school, I'm planning to go to university – obviously get as high an ATAR² as I can so I can do Medical Science. I want to end up doing neurology. (Rhys, Lachlanwest High)

While 18 of the 26 participants clearly articulated a desire to attend university after completing school, others had alternate but equally defined aspirations. In Wyatt's case his *'dream is to work on a station³ up north, own a V8 Cruiser, big muddies⁴, big tough bar⁵'*. This ambition underpinned his plan to *'head up north to work on a station for about three to four years'* and get his *'Certificate in Agriculture'*. For Beau, life after school was similarly based on a long-held dream: *'I'd love to be a musician and travel the world doing lots of collaborations with people'*. However, many of these aspirations were also tinged with a sense of sadness as many recognised that in order to 'become' what they desired, movement away from their community would be necessary.

Not surprisingly, given the context and locations of this study, the theme of 'moving away' featured consistently in interviews, digital stories, and also focus groups although how this was considered varied across groups. For students, the need to move was generally articulated in terms of attending university, as both 'exciting' but also 'scary' or 'fearful':

It's obviously scary for just about anyone who looks into it. It's daunting when you first look at it but it's also exciting at the same time. (Rhys, Lachlanwest High)

I feel excited but also nervous at the same time because it's a pretty big step outside of

² An ATAR is the Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking - one of the ways used to determine entry to university within Australia

³ 'station' refers to large pastoral leases growing beef cattle or sheep sometimes in excess of 4,000 square kilometres (1,500 sq. miles), often in northern areas of Australia

⁴ 'muddies' - slang for mud flaps on a vehicle

⁵ 'big tough bar' refers to a bullbar fitted to most vehicles in these regions to prevent damage from collisions with large animals such as cattle, kangaroos etc

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

school. (Beau, Valley Central)

While movement evoked a diversity of emotions, many students also regarded the need to move as being a ‘hard’ or an onerous thing that was forced upon them. As a necessary act, departure was tinged with a sense of loss and even anticipated grief:

Yeah, in a smaller community I think it’s harder for us to move away and go to a university. (Carly, Valley Central)

The fact that moving away from everything that we’re used to would be a bit hard. (Belinda, Waterslea Central)

I reckon I’ll get very nervous because I don’t like talking around many people – there’s going to be so many people. I get very anxious too and I get panic attacks if I’m in real big crowds so that’s the only problem but I reckon I’ll be able to overcome my fear. (Peta, Rivertown Central)

These students had clearly reflected in depth about possible emotional repercussions of attending university at a very personal level. Whilst some, like Peta, regarded ‘moving away’ as an opportunity to extend themselves or challenge elements of their personality considered a weakness, others like Carly, referred to the difficulty of leaving the safety of the community and the lack of access to important familial support:

Young people might feel like it’s hard for them to get into an industry or find a way that they can grow up when they move away from mum and dad. (Carly, Valley Central)

The teachers also spoke of departure, defining it as something that was both inevitable and almost obligatory, but never easy. Anecdotes provide insight into how leaving and returning can be perceived:

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Our kids really struggle, not with university because we don't have many who go to uni, but if they leave town for any sort of job a lot of them end up back because there is quite a bit of negativity sometimes around people who leave and they don't like to upset their families and they do end up coming back ... they really do struggle (Teacher#5, Wheatfields High)

Returning was often done without attracting too much attention, as another participant described: ‘*a lot of kids do do it and stay where they are, we get a few who trickle back into town quietly and tend to stay after that, which is a bit sad for them*’ (Teacher#4, Gowenville Central). Yet despite the difficulties and the possibility of return, teachers generally indicated that their role was to encourage the young people to consider leaving once their schooling was completed, as the following interchange indicates:

T1 I wish like all our kids would, like you were saying at Wheatfields, you were saying that a lot of them want to get out and then come back

T5 But we encourage them to get out

T1 Oh I do too!

T4 we do as well

T5 the hardest thing is you need to go out and experience life, if you choose not to do that and we encourage them to go, I always do. (Teacher Focus Group)

Sometimes the ‘push’ to depart was related to the teacher’s own biography and experience of leaving a rural setting to attend university, drawing upon their own narrative to encourage contemplation of departure. Teacher#5 from Wheatfields High described how in ‘*All my classes I always say there’s always more to just “here”*’ explaining to her students that once ‘*they first see outside of, you know past that sandstone curtain, once you get over there, there’s a whole different world.*’ She related her

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

own experience of dropping out of university and then later returning to complete her teaching qualification, explaining that this provided her with ‘*a story I can tell them. I dropped out of uni, I’ve worked, I’ve gone to TAFE⁶, I’ve worked again and I’ve gone back to uni*’. A number of teachers similarly used their own biographies of moving to university to encourage students to move away after school. Interestingly some revealed that they themselves had left only to return later to their homeplace to settle.

Striving to stay

[I want to]... *Give back to community – what they have given you it’s more than what you give back really.* (Mason, Wheatfields High)

Mason’s quote is a reflection on his desires for life after completing school, an ambition to attend university that is tightly bound in his family biography. He explained: ‘*I’m the only one in my family that wants to go to uni...I just want to end the tradition of not going to uni and being hard labour all my life*’. Mason’s father and brother are both sheep shearers, a ‘tough’ job that has left them both with chronic pain and resultant unemployment. Mason desires something different for himself but equally, wants to return to the community in order to, as he described, ‘give back.’

Mason’s short reflection sums up the the dichotomy of ‘staying’ and ‘going’ as this is far from being a simplistic divide. As some of the teachers’ own stories also indicated, leaving a community might be the only way to guarantee a return at some point down the track. In the long-term, ‘staying’ was mandated by ‘leaving’. A number of other students indicated that leaving the community was the only way to enable acquisition of the necessary skills and resources that would facilitate their eventual return and resettlement.

The decision to depart was often characterised as a negotiated one. For example, students considering

⁶ Technical and Further Education college – these colleges offer vocational orientated certificates and diplomas, and recently have been mandated for degree qualifications as well

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

university deliberately limited their choice of institution to those that were located in relatively close geographical proximity. This is explained by Maddie (Rivertown Central) who was only considering universities that were *‘not too far from home....still close to dad and my brother....I’m planning to go home at least like once every fortnight. I’m a sook⁷. I love being home’*. She intends to study social work and is determined to find work in the nearest regional centre, and she is adamant that: *‘I’ve got to work there so I’m going to get there’*.

Maddie was not alone in deliberately stratifying her educational choices after school to enable her to remain as close as possible to her rural community. Kate echoed that in order to attend a *‘good uni’* she would have to *‘go all the way to Sydney or something like that and that’s six, seven hours away [from] my family’*. This was not an option for Kate so instead she was considering locations closer to home, admitting: *‘I can’t just do that so that’d be a problem, being away from family and stuff’*. In a similar vein, Kaleb (Acaciaville Central) explained:

I want to be a radiographer, midwife or vet nurse. I’m not quite sure yet. So uni, moving away. I don’t want to move to somewhere too big; I’m a bit scared but that could change yet. I’m not sure.

The teachers also spoke of various negotiated shifts that the young people contemplated when considering life after school. Teacher#7 from Valley Central explained that many of the *‘kids in town....don’t go anywhere for holidays...You know just like it’s not going to happen, because mum and dad work in the holidays, they can’t go anywhere. They don’t have that opportunity.’* For these students, a major city like Sydney seemed almost unreachable, which limited university choices to those outside major cities: *‘...they see Sydney or something that as something that happens once in a lifetime. So there again, to have the universities in those major areas seems like a mountain they can’t*

⁷ A ‘sook’ is slang for a ‘crybaby’; a ‘wimp’ or a ‘coward’ – this has derogatory connotations.

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

climb’ (Teacher#7). Regional universities, while still located at some distance, were literally and metaphorically presented as a compromise, as Teacher#7 elaborated: ‘*So it’s like taking a massive obstacle of Sydney and meeting them halfway.*’

However, given the geographical and familial constraints that these young people encountered it was not only was the choice of university that was limited to what seemed possible, but also the degree. The teachers explained that the degree choice was often dependent on what the students had experienced in their day-to-day life and the qualifications that would enable them to take up employment within the town once graduated. The following interchange in the focus group points to this decision-making process:

T4 Like they’ve spoken to us about the university experiences

T2 in fact they can’t see outside what they can see

T1 But ... so you get the ones that want to come back to home ...

<overtalk> -- teaching, nursing ...

T1 ... and they know that ‘I can do that job at home’ whereas there might be other great jobs out there, but ‘I have to live in Sydney for that job’ ‘Nah can’t do that. Have to leave.

While undoubtedly restricted in their choices, this conversation also reveals a certain level of strategy on the part of the young people. The teachers in this conversation indicated that degree choice was a considered one, sometimes designed to simply enable a predicted future homecoming. In this way, we suggest that some rural youth deliberately design their educational futures based on a desire to return to their home community. This act of ‘striving to stay’ ultimately preserves important emotional connections with both the land and the people around them.

Discussion

Corbett (2016) identifies a ‘persistent insensitivity to difference’ within rural education research, which is manifested through an assumption that being rural can be understood in a collective or

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

universal sense (p.276). Similar to the young participants in Matthews et al’s (2000) study, it is clear that these rural youth did not ‘live as one cultural grouping’ (p.143), instead demarcations according to town and farm kid status as well as individual desires, was all characterised in this data. However, despite obvious differences, the coalescing of perspectives relating to perceptions of leaving, place and belonging clearly emerged in these accounts.

Overwhelmingly, the stories of these young people served to underline the emotionality implied by transitions, forcing recognition of those ‘psychic investments, attachments, projections and resistances’ that choices about HE engender (Kenway & Youdell, 2011, p.132). Like the students in Alloway and Dalley-Trim’s (2009) study, our participants also referred evocatively to ‘the personal and emotional issues associated with the anxieties of moving to the city, and the powerful sense of loss of family and friends which this implies’ (p.58). The sense of ‘loss’ and ‘leaving’ featured strongly, as educational and vocational futures were negotiated in relation to perceived risks as well as hidden desires. The risks included losing connection to family and land as well as the anticipated loneliness of journeys implied by social and educational mobility. Some young people referred to this movement as being ‘hard’ or ‘difficult’ even if inevitable. While young people are often assumed to have the emotional and psychological capacity to be highly mobile, especially as leaving is generally normalised in rural contexts, the reflections of our participants also indicated a different expectation and the desire for a different type of trajectory (Stockdale, et al., 2018).

Teachers similarly reflected upon this ‘push’ and ‘pull’ of rural life, yet overwhelmingly they characterised leaving as being the more beneficial or positive action. As Teacher#5 explained these young people were ‘encouraged...to get out.’ Similarly, ‘staying’ or returning was something that was hidden - the stayers were described as those who ‘trickled back into town quietly’ which was ‘sad’ for them (Teacher#4). This perspective reflects how ‘stayers’ are often perceived as ‘problematic’ within the social mobility discourse, those who choose to stay are ‘often considered backward or otherwise inadequate’ (Erikson et al, 2018, p.9). For the young people in this study, there seemed to be a

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

combining impact of being ‘emotionally attached’ to the landscape, an attachment not matched by the required ‘practical satisfaction’ such as employment or education opportunities (Erikson, et al., 2018, p.3). This created a complex scenario which had to be considered and addressed. Arguably these young people were all unwittingly caught up in a social mobility discourse that attributes success with mobility.

Increasingly the literature on mobility challenges the presumption that ‘staying’ is necessarily a negative or passive act (Erikson et al, 2018; Morse & Mudgett, 2018; Stockdale et al, 2018). Staying or temporarily leaving are being recognised as highly complex decisions. ‘Stayers’ in fact, may exercise ‘diverse forms of mobility’ in order to remain at their homeplace (Morse & Mudgett, 2018, p.261). In this study, we argue that the young people did exercise some autonomy in their choice of degree and institution. By choosing areas of study they knew would be needed in their community, they endeavoured to assure their eventual return. While this was only a partial freedom, it did address the need for these rural youth to maintain a relationship to their homeplace while equally pursuing educational or employment opportunities not available in these communities.

Arguably, decisions to stay may also be regarded as diverse forms of mobility enacted through a temporary mobility. Haarsten and Thissen (2014) differentiate between younger returners who may have left their communities for employment or educational opportunities, arguing that many of these individuals have ‘not really left their home region mentally’ (p.97), instead this is a ‘transitional move’ dictated by external requirements rather than internal desires. Similarly, Erikson, et al., (2018) refer to ‘psychological stayers’ as those individuals who ‘may leave their community for various reasons but remain tied to it and then return as soon as they can’ (p.2). Mobility is then characterised by a diffuseness, not always a one-way linear journey.

Rather than perceive mobility as a mono-directional process it is perhaps more productive to consider it as a relational and repeated movement, characterised by ‘frequent and often repeated or rhythmic moves between multiple residences’ (Coulter et al, 2015, p.359). This has definite applications within

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

the HE sector in Australia, where contemplating university attendance for a rural young person inevitably necessitates movement. Conceiving movement in a relational sense can better conceptualise the fluid nature of such mobilities. We contend that for many rural youth in Australia, these can also be strategic decisions where ‘leaving’ also ultimately facilitates ‘staying’. Yet educational policymakers often inadvertently perceive staying from a ‘mobility perspective’; assuming stayers have ‘failed’ to leave or have been ‘left behind’. This points to a need to adopt a more fluid understanding of staying and leaving, including the emotional work of having to negotiate leaving in terms of staying and facilitating the complexity of such decisions (rather than dismissing or assuming them as deficit).

Such a shift in understanding can both assist those making the decisions and ultimately the rural communities who will benefit from their returning youth. A broader understanding of both mobility and also the decision-making processes of rural youth would foreground agency and the temporal nature of decisions as well as acknowledge the complexity of decisions about post-schooling futures. Such decisions are buffeted by relational considerations, connections to the land and the community as well as the divisive problematic created by having ‘to leave in order to stay’.

References

- ACARA. (2018). MySchool. Retrieved from <https://www.myschool.edu.au>
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Alloway, N., & Dalley-Trim, L. (2009). ‘High and Dry’ in rural Australia: Obstacles to student aspirations and expectations. *Rural Society*, 19(1), 49-59. doi: 10.5172/rsj.351.19.1.49
- Altbach, P. (2013). *The international imperative in higher education*. Rotterdam: Springer.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016. The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure. Available from <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure>

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

- Campbell, L. O., & Cox, T. D. (2018). Digital video as a personalized learning assignment: A qualitative study of student authored video using the ICSDR model. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 18(1), 11-24. doi: 10.14434/josotl.v18i1.21027
- Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community*. Halifax, Canada: Fernwood.
- Corbett, M. (2016). Rural futures: Development, aspirations, mobilities, place, and education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91(2), 270-282.
- Coulter, R., van Ham, M., & Findlay, A. (2015). Re-thinking residential mobility: Linking lives through time and space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(3), 352-374.
- Cresswell, T. (2010). Mobilities 1: Catching up. *Progress in Human Geography*, 35(4), 550-558.
- Cuervo, H. (2014). Critical reflections on youth and equality in the rural context. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(4), 544-557.
- de Jager, A., Fogarty, A., Tweson, A., Lenette, C., & Boydell, K. (2017). Digital Storytelling in research: A systematic review. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(10), 2548-2582.
- Erikson, L., Sanders, S., & Cope, M. (2018). Lifetime stayers in urban, rural and highly rural communities in Montana. *Population, Space and Place*, 24, 1-12.
- Farmer, D. (2017) Children and youth’s mobile journeys: Making sense and connections within global contexts. (pp.245-269). In Skelton, T. (Editor-in-Chief) *Geographies of Children and Young People, Major Reference Work*, vol 6. Ní Laoire, C. and White A. (Co-Ed of vol.) *Movement, Mobilities and Journeys*. New Delhi: Springer.
- Friedman, S. (2014). The price of the ticket: Rethinking the experience of social mobility. *Sociology*, 48(2), 352-368.
- Green, B. & Letts, W. (2007). Space, equity, and rural education: A 'trialectical' account. In K. N. Gulson & C. Symes (Eds.), *Spatial Theories of Education: Policy and Geography Matters* (pp.57-76). New York: Routledge.
- Haartsen, T., & Thissen, F. (2014). The success-failure dichotomy revisited: Young adult motives to return to their rural home region. *Children's Geographies*, 12(1), 87-101.

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Hickey-Moody, A., & Kenway, J. (2017). Sticky places: temporality, affect and gender in Australian country towns. In Catherine Driscoll, Kate Darian-Smith & D. Nichols (Eds.), *Cultural Sustainability in Rural Communities: Rethinking Australian Country Towns* (pp.137-151). United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

Holt, B. (2008). "You are going to go somewhere!" The power of conferred identity status on 'disadvantaged' students and their mobility to university. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, QUT. Available from <https://www.aare.edu.au/publications-database.php>

Kenway, J., & Yodell, D. (2011). The emotional geographies of education: Beginning a conversation. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4, 131-136.

Lehmann, W. (2009). Becoming middle class: How working-class university students draw and transgress moral class boundaries. *Sociology*, 43(4), 631-647.

Loveday, V. (2015). Working class participation, middle class aspiration? Value, upward mobility and symbolic indebtedness in higher education. *The Sociological Review*, 63, 570-588.

Marginson, S. (2016). The worldwide trend to high participation in higher education: Dynamics of social stratification in inclusive systems. *Higher Education*, 72, 413-434.

Matthews, H., Taylor, M., Sherwood, K., Tucker, F., & Limb, M. (2000). Growing-up in the countryside: Children and the rural idyll. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16, 141-153.

Morrison, A. R. (2014). ‘You have to be well spoken’: Students’ views on employability within the graduate labour market. *Journal of Education and Work*, 27(2), 179-198. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2012.742178

Morse, C., & Mudgett, J. (2018). Happy to be home: Place based attachments, family ties and mobility among rural stayers. *The Professional Geographer*, 70(2), 261-269.

Parsons, S., Guldberg, K., Porayska-Pomsta, K., & Lee, R. (2015). Digital Stories as a method for evidence-based practice and knowledge co-creation in technology-enhanced learning for children with autism. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 38(3), 247-271. Doi: 10.1080/1743727X.2015.1019852

‘Learning to leave’ or ‘striving to stay’: Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures

Reay, D. (2004). It's all becoming a habitus: Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research.

British Journal of Sociology of Education, 25(4), 431-444.

Reay, D. (2013). Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: Tales of emperors, frogs and tadpoles. *British*

Journal of Sociology of Education, 34(5-6), 660-677.

Reay, D. (2016). Social class in higher education: Still an elephant in the room. In J. Cote & J.

Furlong (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education*. London:

Routledge.

Rerat, P. (2014). The selective migration of young graduates: Which of them return to their rural home region

and which do not? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 35, 123-132.

Rubino, I., Barberis, C., & Malnati, G. (2018). Exploring the values of writing collaboratively through a

digital storytelling platform: A mixed-methods analysis of users' participation, perspectives and

practices. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1-13. Doi: 10.1080/10494820.2017.1419499

Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S.

Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp.189 - 211). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Stockdale, A., Theunissen, N., & Haartsen, T. (2018). Staying in a state of flux: A life course

perspective on the diverse staying processes of rural young adults. *Population, Space and*

Place, 24, 1-10.

Treffry-Goatley, A., Lessells, R., Sykes, P., Bärnighausen, T., de Oliveira, T., Moletsane, R., &

Seeley, J. (2016). Understanding specific contexts of antiretroviral therapy adherence in rural

South Africa: A thematic analysis of digital stories from a community with high HIV

prevalence. *PloS one*, 11(2), 1-18.

Williams, L., Gott, M., Moeke-Maxwell, T., Black, S., Kothari, S., Pearson, S., ... & Hansen, W. W.

(2017). Can digital stories go where palliative care research has never gone before? A

descriptive qualitative study exploring the application of an emerging public health research

method in an indigenous palliative care context. *BMC palliative care*, 16(1), 1-9.