

Ten Years On - School Leavers from a Remote Island Community

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Abstract

Senior high school students in rural communities face the question “where do we go from here?” In small schools in isolated areas of Canada and Australia senior students often have to migrate to larger centres to enroll in the final years of high school to undertake post-secondary education or to seek employment. The question “where do we go from here?” was examined by one of the authors in a rural school in Queensland, Australia before the other two authors considered its implications in a remote high school in Newfoundland and Labrador. Ten years after graduating 34 students from a rural Canadian high school were contacted (from a graduating class of 62) and surveyed by questionnaire about the major influences on their post secondary educational and career choices. The significance of the problem of rural students seeking to comprehend the non-local world before migrating to it had many implications for their life chances. This rural educational issue has implications for the pre-service education of future teachers.

Les étudiants de collège aînés dans les communautés rurales font face à la question “où allons-nous à partir d’ici ?” Dans de petites écoles dans les régions isolées d’étudiants d’ainé d’Australie et de Canada doivent souvent émigrer à de plus grands centres pour s’inscrire aux dernières années de collège pour entreprendre le post-enseignement secondaire ou chercher l’emploi. La question “où nous allons à partir d’ici” a été examiné par un des auteurs dans une école rurale dans Queensland, l’Australie avant que les deux autres auteurs ont considéré ses implications dans un collège lointain dans le Terre-neuve et le Labrador. Dix ans après le fait de sortir 34 étudiants d’un collège canadien rural ont été contactés (d’une classe obtenante le maîtrise de 62) et étudiés par le questionnaire des influences importantes sur leur poste sec-

ondaire éducatif et choix de carrière. La signification du problème d’étudiants ruraux cherchant à comprendre le monde non-local avant le fait d’y émigrer avait beaucoup d’implications pour leurs chances de vie. Cette édition éducative rurale a des implications pour l’éducation de pré-service d’enseignants futurs.

Isolation is readily associated with rural schools, particularly those in communities located far from major centres of population (Golding, 2001; Stevens, 1998). In two of the geographically largest countries in the world – Australia and Canada – physical isolation becomes an important consideration in the lives of rural secondary school students, particularly when faced with the necessity of migration to larger centres to be able to access post-compulsory education or to search for employment.

Two studies – one in Australia and the other in Atlantic Canada - followed geographically-isolated senior high school students from small rural communities as they made their post year twelve educational and vocational choices. The Australian study addressed the ongoing concern about the education of rural students in that country in terms of their lower participation in post-secondary programs than their urban peers (Abbott-Chapman, 2001; Chote et al. 1992; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975,1987; Golding, 2001; James et.al. 1999; Wyn,1998). The Canadian study had its origins in the earlier study conducted in outback Australia, in the state of Queensland (Stevens 1998), and was refined and further developed by Tucker and Stevens (1999) in Newfoundland and Labrador. Almost all students in both countries had to leave home and migrate to larger centres to be able to continue post-compulsory education or look for work. In the Canadian study, a decade after graduating, members of the year

twelve high school class were contacted and asked about their career development.

The Original Study: Career Choice in Rural Australia

Some rural high school students in Australia face the problem of living in geographically-isolated communities and, from them, having to make career decisions about places, institutions and careers about which they have little direct knowledge or experience. Final year students in small rural schools have to answer the question “Where do we go from here?” While all school leavers have to consider this issue, in the case of rural students it often means migration to urban centres and entry to unfamiliar environments and lifestyles.

The Australian origins of the Canadian research, outlined below, were in outback Queensland, far from major coastal centres of population (Stevens, 1998). Stevens undertook a study of 30 final year students in a remote community in the interior of the state who had to make post year ten educational or vocational career choices at around the minimum leaving age, which was fifteen at the time of the study. No formal education was provided in the community beyond year ten at the time of the study and there were few local jobs for school leavers. In making post school educational and career choices it was revealed in the Australian study that some young rural people were more isolated from post-secondary school educational and career opportunities than others while living within the same community. Those young rural people who had had little direct personal contact with the non-local world were found to be particularly isolated from post school educational and vocational opportunities. This is not a widely-recognized feature of rural life in spite of the social and educational implications that it entails (Boomer, 1987; Golding, 2001;



James et.al, 1999). A move from a rural to an urban community and school is not merely a physical change of location for students; it involves intellectual and emotional adjustments and rural school leavers can experience these in different ways (Bell, 1987; Chenoweth and Galliher, 2004).

Traditionally, school leavers in the rural Australian community could readily find employment with the shire council, the state railway or on the vast sheep and cattle stations that extend throughout the interior of the state (Stevens, 1998). However, at the time of the study the community could provide almost no local employment for school leavers as the economy was in recession. Almost all students in the year ten class that was the focus of the study had to leave their small, rural community to either continue their education to year twelve and graduate if they wished to enroll in a university or institution of higher education, or leave in search of employment or trade apprenticeships elsewhere. There was confusion among the school leavers in the study as to where they could or should go at the conclusion of their final year at school. Many members of the class faced the issue of making personal sense of the non-local world that had, in some cases, never been directly experienced (Stevens, 1988; Stewart, 2003). The study explored how young people leaving school in a rural community made their post year ten educational and career decisions. It was difficult to claim that rural students had educational opportunities equal to their urban counterparts when they could not undertake full high school courses in their own community (Henry, 1989; McGaw et.al.,1977). Since the study was undertaken, full secondary education in the community has been introduced with classes to year twelve.

The study began with a broad question, identified three decades earlier by the Schools' Commission (1975;1987) and the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia (1976; 1978) that young people in rural schools did not enter higher educational institutions in numbers proportionate to their urban counterparts. Partly on this basis, the Schools Commission identified rural schools in Australia as being education-

ally disadvantaged along with women, migrants and aborigines. The issues raised by the Commonwealth Schools Commission and the Commission of Inquiry Into Poverty formed the basis for an exploratory study into the post-year ten dimension of rural educational disadvantage in the small and isolated Queensland community.

Almost all the boys in the study (86 per cent) provided a match between their occupational aspirations and expectations, but only 38 per cent of girls' aspirations matched their expectations (Stevens & McSwan, 1995; Stevens, 1998). A partial explanation for this was reluctance on the part of many students, particularly those with least experience and knowledge of the non-rural world, to leave the community. For some school leavers, any local job, even if it was unskilled and low-paid, was preferable to migrating to an urban centre in search of further education or a career. Reluctance to leave familiar surroundings is at best a partial explanation for the mismatch between the girls' aspirations and expectations. In this community a strict sexual division of labour existed in which paid work was mostly undertaken by men. This may have influenced the gap between girls' aspirations and expectations.

Students in the Australian study were influenced in making their post-secondary educational and career decisions in several ways: by their nuclear and extended families, by their local and non-local peers, by the school and by significant others. Almost all boys listed their father as an influence on the post school educational and vocational decision while the majority of girls were strongly influenced by their mothers. The school had very little influence on the post year ten decisions of boys, with only one citing this institution as an influence. Students were more influenced by local than non-local peers and were influenced only by their friends of the same sex. Significant others influenced relatively few students. However, when present, the significant other influence was very strong because it came from people mostly in the chosen occupation of the student or from related media.

The Follow-up Study: School Leavers in Rural Canada

Final year students in some small rural schools in Canada, as in Australia, have to answer the question "Where do we go from here?" Some Canadian rural high school students, like their Australian counterparts, faced the problem of living in geographically-isolated communities and having to make career decisions about places, institutions and careers about which they had little direct knowledge or experience (Tucker, 1999). While all Canadian school leavers have to consider this issue, in the case of rural students it often means migration to urban centres and entry to unfamiliar environments and lifestyles. As with their Australian counterparts, this could be a difficult process for rural students and their families. A study of Canadian school leavers from the remote Fogo Island community located off the north coast of Newfoundland was undertaken to ascertain where students were and what they were doing a decade after they completed year twelve. Fogo Island is about 25 kilometres long and 14 kilometres wide. It has a population of 2,706 (2006 census) that is organized into eleven communities. Until the depletion of cod stocks in the 1990's, fishing was the main economic activity on the island. Sixty-two senior high school students from Fogo Island participated in the original study that was undertaken in 1998. Of those able to be located ten years later, 34 members of the original sample responded, providing a response rate of almost 55 percent.

The aspirations and expectations of rural high school students tell us a lot about their perceptions of their communities, the local opportunities available to them, their understanding of other places and their evaluation of local versus non-local futures. The last major study in this area in Newfoundland and Labrador was carried out by Craig Tucker (1999). In terms of the students' aspirations and expectations, Tucker found that "for the most part the careers listed (by students) are those that are found on this isolated island." Re-visiting the outcomes of the aspirations and expectations of the graduating class of 1998 provides a unique opportunity to



study the impact of the family, school, peers and other influences on these outcomes within the rural setting.

Methodology

Research Questions

The study sought to find answers to the following questions 10 years beyond high school:

1. What careers did students select?
2. To what extent did their career choices match their original aspirations?
3. How did the aspirations and expectations formulated at school, as identified by Tucker, guide students in their choices over the past seven years?
4. What influenced their choices? (e.g. peers, family, school etc?)

Instrument

A survey instrument was designed based on the original survey to capture educational and occupational related data as well as job satisfaction and influences on former students' present careers. Questions were re-written to reflect the fact that these former students may have gone on to higher education or joined the labour force directly from school. For example, rather than asking questions about what students intended to do when they left school, the survey instrument asked what they actually did after they left school. The survey instrument also included questions concerning major influences on career choice such as family, media and teachers. A final question asked respondents if there were any other things that they would like to say about how they arrived at their current career or educational choice.

Procedure

Upon acceptance of the research proposal, letters were sent to the local media describing the study together with its ethical considerations. A research assistant was hired to contact the former students using home contact information collected at the time of the first survey as well as contact information collected by Craig Tucker who worked in the area up until the time of

the study. Once contact was made by telephone, former students were asked if they would like to participate in the follow-up study. Those that agreed were sent a consent form to sign and return. They were then contacted for a 30-minute formal telephone interview.

Participants

Of the 62 students in the original study, contact was made with 34 members of the class in the summer of 2007, providing a response rate of almost 55 percent. Sixty-two percent of the sample was female, meaning they were slightly over-represented from the original study in which they represented 53 percent of the class. A chi-square analysis showed that these differences were not significant, $X^2(1, n = 34) = 2.21, p > .05$. Further analysis was undertaken to determine if the contacted participants differed from those not contacted, using variables from the original study. The variables that were considered important were "the perfect job" they wanted, mother and father's General Education Development (GED) and Specific Vocational Preparation (SVP) levels together with the number of academic and non-academic courses taken in school.

GED values range from 1 to 6 with lower values associated with simple levels of reasoning, mathematical and language development. Higher values are associated with advanced levels of reasoning, mathematical and language development. SVP looks at the level of training an occupation is required to have. SVP values range from 1 to 9. Value 1 indicates short demonstration only with a score of 9 indicating over 10 years of vocational preparation (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1989). Further analysis was done using ANOVA on GED and SVP levels of the perfect job ($F(1, 60) = 1.93, p > .05$); $F(1, 60) = 1.89, p > .05$), mother's GED and SVP ($F(1, 51) = 0.02, p > .05$); $F(1, 51) = 0.15, p > .05$), and father's GED and SVP levels ($F(1, 54) = 4.47, p < .05$); $F(1, 53) = 2.60, p > .05$), the number of academic courses $F(1, 60) = 0.30, p > .05$ and non-academic courses $F(1, 60) = 0.08, p > .05$ to see if those surveyed were different from those not surveyed. All but father's GED

turned up not significant. This would indicate that those who did survey were very similar to those not surveyed. The surveys were administered during the months of June and July, 2007. Only two people refused to be interviewed with the rest being unable to be contacted.

Ethical considerations

The proposal to complete the research was presented to the University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR). In the ethics proposal participants were asked if the researchers could use data collected by Craig Tucker for his 1999 thesis.

Data analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS for Windows (SPSS Inc, 2005). Due to the descriptive nature of the study frequency distributions were used in the results section while cross-tabulations and Analyses of Variance were used to determine if the participants who were contacted were similar to those not contacted.

Results

Postsecondary choices by Rural Canadian Students

Almost 90 percent of those participating completed some form of post high school educational program covering 44 different programs, the most common types being non-university related. Most educational programs in which the students participated were in the community college or private sector and all were completed away from the remote island community. Eight students (26.7 percent) obtained degrees while the majority completed programs that were of three years duration or less. The major reason stated for undertaking an educational program was personal interest (39.1%). When asked what they thought their parents wanted them to do after school, most students indicated that both their mothers and fathers wanted them to continue their education after high school. Three students, however, did not complete any educational programs: one abandoned her studies



when her father became ill, another reported that he did not enjoy the program and a third expressed the need to earn money immediately rather than continue studying. Eighty percent of the courses undertaken by the students when they left their island community were within the province and twenty percent embarked on courses beyond Newfoundland and Labrador.

Career choices by Rural Canadian Students

Most of the respondents (88.2%) were employed at the time that they were interviewed in 2007 and seventy-six percent were in the same job that they had the previous year. When asked what type of employment they were in currently most indicated that they were employed in the field of medicine and health (47.8%), while 13% were in construction and trades followed by product fabricating. Most jobs (76.7%) were full-time and most were located away from Fogo Island with 36.7% indicating that they were employed elsewhere in the province. A third of the students indicated that their job was outside the province and one was beyond Canada. No one was dissatisfied with their work, with the majority indicating that they were “very satisfied” with what they were doing (63.3%). The remaining students indicated that they were “satisfied” with their current employment. When asked if their work was related to what they expected to do after leaving high school, 62.3% indicated that it was “related.” However, only 23.3% indicated that it was “very related”, with another 23.3% indicating that it was “somewhat related”.

Table 1, above, identifies influences on the Canadian students’ current careers. The most significant influence was “personal interest” with over 90% indicating that this accounted for “a little” or “a lot” with over 70% expressing a lot. Parents exerted the next highest level of support, at over 70% for “a little” to “a lot” for mothers and over 70% for “a little” to “a lot” for fathers. The desire to remain at home was the next greatest influence with just over 40% indicating a little to a lot. Table 1 indicates that the media and guidance counselors had little influence and teachers

Table 1
Retrospective of Influences on Current Career.

	Number	Not at all Percent	A little Percent	A lot Percent	Mean
Mother	30	23.33	56.67	20.00	1.97
Father	30	26.67	53.33	20.00	1.93
Siblings Male	22	77.27	22.73	0.00	1.23
Siblings Female	26	61.54	38.46	0.00	1.38
Cousins (extended family)	28	78.57	21.43	0.00	1.21
Guidance counselor	30	86.67	13.33	0.00	1.13
Teachers (Fogo)	30	56.67	43.33	0.00	1.43
Instructors (Elsewhere)	30	80.00	16.67	3.33	1.23
Friends (Fogo)	30	60.00	36.67	3.33	1.43
Friends (Other places)	30	63.33	30.00	6.67	1.43
Media (Fogo) Type	30	90.00	10.00	0.00	1.10
Media (Other) Type	30	76.67	20.00	3.33	1.27
Personal interest	30	6.67	20.00	73.33	2.67
Desire to remain home or near home	29	55.17	24.14	20.69	1.66
Others – specify	27	88.89	3.70	7.41	1.19

were only moderately influential in the careers chosen by students.

When asked, using an open-ended question, the reasons for selecting their current occupation the responses varied widely with almost 60 reasons given. For most it was personal interest (16.9%), good money (15.3%), they liked working with people (8.5%), they needed money (6.8%) and personal satisfaction (6.8%). While the media and field trips had minimal influence on choice of career, two students (6.7%) indicated that the Internet had the greatest influence on their career choice. The survey found that 93% of fathers wanted their children to continue their education after high school while only 7% wanted their children to begin employment immediately rather than enroll in a post-secondary institution. Mothers expressed similar feelings with only one (3.3%) expressing the view that their

child should enter employment immediately after high school.

Table 2 shows the influence of home, family, community, school and media on future plans in the original Canadian study (Tucker, 1999). The greatest influence on career choices after leaving school was from courses with 62.0% answering yes. This was followed by the influence of relatives with 59.0% indicating that relatives helped them decide what they would be doing after high school. Fifty percent indicated yes when asked: Have you gained any knowledge or received any information on the T.V. or radio that helped you in making plans for your future? Equal numbers of students (32.0%) indicated that they had sessions with counselors concerning their future plans and had used a computer or the Internet to obtain information about possible career or educational choices.

Table 2
Home-Family-Community, School-Media-Information-Technology Influences on Career Choices After Leaving High School (N=34).

Influence	Percent responding - Yes
Home-Family-Community Q5. Have any of your relatives helped you to decide what you are going to do after high school in terms of either jobs or education?	59.0
School Q2. Have any courses that you have done helped you decide what your future plans will be?	62.0
School Q4. Have you had any information sessions with the guidance counselor concerning your future plans?	32.0
Media Q5. Have you gained any knowledge or received any information on the T.V. or radio which helped you in making plans for your future?	50.0
Media Q7. Have you used a computer or the internet to obtain information about possible career or educational choices?	32.0



Those Who Were Employed But Chose No Postsecondary Education or Training

Four of the students that were interviewed did not go on to any form of post-secondary education. While they are a small number, they provided insight into where they are at present. Three of these students were male. All had a good idea of what it would take to get the perfect job, such as obtaining good marks at school and then entering a training program or some form of further post-secondary education. These students all had mothers and fathers who worked in traditional occupations such as fishing and trapping, processing and clerical work. An analysis of their high school grades indicated that on the whole their average marks were in the lower level of the class with grades in the 50% to 60% range. The four students were all employed at the time of the survey.

Those Who Were Unemployed at the Time of the Study

Four female students at the time of the survey were not employed. Three had attended post-secondary institutions after high school and one obtained a Bachelor's degree in Science and the others obtained business diplomas and, in one case, a commercial cooking certificate. The students had all undertaken educational programs out of personal interest when they left their remote island school. One of these respondents indicated that she had had seven different jobs over the past five years. Of the four, one indicated that her last job was "somewhat related" to what she expected when she left school, one indicated "a bit" related and two indicated that their last jobs were not at all related to what they expected when they left school.

Discussion

This research has shown that most students from the class of 1998 went on to do some form of post-secondary training. The majority of these students did non-university related programs. The most common reason for undertaking the programs was out of interest. Many of the students were employed ten years on. Most were working in areas which were related to what they

expected to be doing after high school. Personal interest was a strong factor related to their current career choice. Parents exerted a great deal of influence on their career choices. Not surprisingly, the desire to stay in their rural community had an impact on their current career choice. Those who did not go on to postsecondary schooling had relatively low high school marks and parents who worked in traditional occupations. However, all were employed at the time of the study. Of the 4 who were not working at the time of follow-up, 3 indicated that they were not working because they wanted to raise their children.

Conclusion

The problem "where do we go from here?" is common to rural students having to make non-local further education and career choices. In rural Australia and rural Canada several common responses to this question can be identified. Young people in both countries experienced isolation in different ways even though they lived in the same small communities. For school leavers in Queensland and those in Newfoundland and Labrador the move from their small and isolated communities to other places, including cities, involved not just a physical change in the location of where they lived but also intellectual and emotional adjustments. In both the Australian and Canadian studies rural school leavers often expressed a desire to remain in their home communities and migrated reluctantly for further education or employment. In both studies parents of school leavers were influential in the post-school choices that students made. In the Australian study, fathers were found to have more influence on sons and mothers were more influential in the decisions of their daughters.

Several issues from the Australian and Canadian studies deserve attention from educational policy makers that have not been emphasized in previous research. First, school leavers from rural communities experience isolation in different ways. Some are more isolated from the non-local world than others, depending on the nature and extent of their contact with other places. Second,

recognition within pre-service teacher education courses of the problem facing many senior students in rural schools making post-secondary educational and career decisions may help teachers reduce the impact of physical isolation on educational outcomes. Teacher awareness of the issue of rural student migration to urban education and employment may assist young people to make, what is for many, a necessary but often difficult transition. Third, the question why the school, teachers and professionals such as counsellors have so little influence on rural students' career choices in both countries is unclear and needs further investigation. Finally, the role of interactive social media, virtual classes (Stevens, 2003) and the Internet as influences on career choices were alluded to in the Canadian study but the nature and extent of their impact is unknown. In the meantime, "where do we go from here?" remains a central issue in the education of school leavers who live beyond major centres of population.

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