

**Geographical dimensions of imagined futures: post school  
participation in education and work in peri-urban and regional  
Australia**

**Abstract**

This paper discusses preliminary findings from a sub-set of empirical data collected for a recent NCVET study that explored the geographic dimensions of social exclusion in four locations in Victoria and South Australia with lower than average post school education participation. Set against the policy context of the Bradley Review (2008) and the drive to increase the post-school participation of young people from low socio-economic status neighbourhoods, this qualitative research study, responding to identified gaps in the literature, sought a nuanced understanding of how young people make decisions about their post-school pathways. Drawing on Appadurai's (2004) concept 'horizons of aspiration' the paper explores the aspirations of two young people formed from, and within, their particular rural 'neighborhoods'. The paper reveals how their post-school education and work choices, imagined futures and conceptions of a 'good life', have topographic and gendered influences that are important considerations for policy makers.

**Introduction**

The Bradley Review (2008), commissioned by the Australian government, recommended a target be set at federal level that, '40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds will have attained at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2020' (p. xiv), compared

to the 29 per cent at the time. Bradley found that, while there were high participation rates in further education and training among metropolitan students, between 2002 and 2007 already low rates of participation amongst students from regional locations had declined (Bradley 2008). The report's recommendations for regional Australia pointed out both the difficulties and deficiencies of current provision outside metropolitan locations and argued for greater attention and funding as well as the importance of engaging local communities in developing appropriate strategies.

With increasing evidence and concern about the spatial concentration of disadvantage, place-based policy responses, sometimes mixed with people-based policies to 'improve' both place and residents, have emerged across different levels of government in Australia (Baum et al. 1999, Baum et al. 2008, Byron 2010, Randolph 2004). This policy turn has documented many factors affecting the participation of students from regional Australia in education and training (The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee 2009), including significant access barriers of distance and costs.

Geography can therefore have far reaching effects on people's lives and opportunities, but arguably people mediate spaces and places in the ways they live their lives. Less well understood is how these processes work and whether place-based, person-based strategies or a mixture will ameliorate geographical and social and educational inequalities (Griggs et al. 2008). Smyth & McInerney contend that:

the effect of neighbourhoods and places on the lives, educational opportunities and life chances of young people from contexts of socio-economic disadvantage [...] is not well understood, and invariably reinforces deficit stereotypes. (2013, p. 2)

Similarly Meegan and Mitchell (2001) call for research that understands people's 'everyday life worlds' because as Lupton (2010, p. 117) has argued, place-based interventions have become conceptually confused.

This paper presents preliminary findings from a small sub-set of empirical data collected for a National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) project exploring the geographical dimensions of social exclusion. The larger project initially conducted quantitative economic modeling of post-school participation across Australia and findings pointed to significant geographic discrepancies and distinctions within and across postcodes and state electoral divisions, within and between urban and regional and remote areas (Johnston *et al.* 2014). Qualitative research was identified as necessary to understand the mechanisms through which the characteristics of neighbourhoods affect young people and their educational outcomes differentially. Subsequently, an in-depth qualitative study was undertaken of four areas of social disadvantage in Victoria and South Australia: two areas of rural Gippsland in Victoria and two peri-urban sites north and south of Adelaide. Purposive sampling was used to explore the processes that enable some young people in low socio-economic neighbourhoods to overcome neighbourhood effects and participate in post-school education and training. The research asked the question 'How do individuals live their lives in neighbourhoods of disadvantage, make decisions about where, how and with whom they spend their time and imagine their education and work futures? Interviews were conducted with 53 educational providers and representatives from organisations and state departments supporting young people's learning in the four selected areas. The key informants also facilitated access to the sample of young people (51 in total) aged between 16 and 25 years who were currently in education or training in schools, vocational education and training and

universities. Data analysis was an iterative, thematic process, based around themes identified from the literature (including identified gaps in the literature). Initial analysis based upon focus group data was tested and refined through later individual informal interviews conducted with a subset of sixteen young people from the focus groups who were selected for the conceptual relevance of the patterning of their lived experiences.

The paper draws on data collected in Victoria for the latter phase of the study, focussing on two of the sixteen case studies. A young man from East Gippsland and a young woman from western Gippsland, were selected for several similarities including their clearly articulated aspirations and imagined futures. A comparative analysis facilitates examination of our contention that a nuanced understanding of the geography of neighbourhoods is required in order to tailor policy responses to factors affecting the educational aspirations, choices, life chances and imagined futures of young people from rural and regional locales. Analysis of the cases draws on Appadurai's (2004) concepts of 'horizons of aspiration' and 'navigational capacity' and it is the literature on aspiration and geography to which we now turn.

### **Capacities to aspire and navigate locality**

Aspiration is perhaps best described as 'the capacity to imagine futures' (Sellar & Gale 2011, p. 122). Young people's capacity to imagine the future is understood to be the product of a range of intersecting factors:

there is no single determinant of education aspirations, but rather a complex interplay between related considerations which operate cumulatively to reflect how far a student hopes to progress in school, and

the degree of education they seek to achieve. (Regional Policy Advisory Committee 2013, p. 32)

Key factors in determining young people's aspirations include their own experiences of schooling; level of school attainment; peers' choices; knowledge, awareness of and exposure to post-school education and career opportunities; parental, family and community views regarding education and career; the availability of advice, support and assistance surrounding post-school transitions; and the complex constellation of conditions and circumstances that make up socioeconomic status (Regional Policy Advisory Committee 2013).

Arjun Appadurai (2004) suggests that the capacity for aspiration is one that is unequally distributed:

The capacity to aspire is [...] a navigational capacity. The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbours. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity [...] have a more brittle horizon of aspirations. (2004, p. 69)

Similarly, Mookherjee, Ray and Nepal (2010) have suggested that aspirations are 'based on the current or past achievements of one's neighbors, located within some given spatial or social window' (p. 141). Contemporary data on young people's aspirations in regional Australia echoes this metaphor, suggesting that 'individuals have an aspirations window through which they view the possibilities that exist within their social sphere' (Regional Policy Advisory Committee 2013, p. 27). The report

suggests aspirations of young people in rural or regional settings are both particularly dependent on local contexts and conditions and highly subjective. This means that ‘young people formulate aspirations on the basis of what they can “see” and experience’ (Regional Policy Advisory Committee 2013, p. 28). Gale et al. (2013) conclude that many young people’s choices and decisions about their futures ‘draw on a limited archive of experience and knowledge’ (p. 6).

Educational aspirations of students and families are one of the most frequently identified issues for attention in eastern Victoria’s Gippsland region (Dow et al. 2011). Alloway and her colleagues (2004) note that the impact of rurality on young people’s lives is complex and contested, describing ‘a deficit model of Australian rurality’ (p. 28) that frequently equates a rural geographic location, such as areas of Gippsland, with social disadvantage. Existing research on geographies, choice and aspirations of young people is predominantly quantitative and large scale, drawing on government commissioned data-sets such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth and OnTrack (see for example Underwood et al. 2012, Rothman et al. 2008, Hillman 2005, Department of Education, Science and Training 2007) While these provide a broad numeric picture and highlight key trends and themes at a population level, qualitative research, such as that behind this paper, facilitates nuanced understanding of ‘rurality’ and ‘regional’ for targeted policy making.

The literature review for the NCVER project found little focus on the specific geographies within which young people form their aspirations (Webb *et al.* 2014) in press). Even valuable in-depth qualitative work conducted by researchers such as Mills and Gale (2008) neglect to clearly locate the work. Surprisingly also, gender is almost completely absent from existing analyses even though there are clear gender differences in the data around subject choices and rates of early school-leaving.

Indeed, Hillman (2005) states that gender is not an issue when considering experiences of post-school transitions, although Mills and Gale (2008) do mention that rural constructions of gender may limit women's choices post- further education.

In comparatively analyzing the stories of one young woman and one young man from different locales within a given rural region, this paper therefore adds texture to the concepts of 'rural' and 'regional'.

### **Gippsland geographies of participation and aspiration**

Gippsland is characterised by 'large distances, diverse and challenging geography, and comparatively small communities' (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2012, p. 7). It covers over 42,000 square kilometres with, in 2011, a total population of only 247,710 (Dow et al. 2011). For the purposes of this research project, we have characterised it in broad geographic terms as western Gippsland and East Gippsland.

East Gippsland is a predominantly rural area, where towns are up to 550 kilometres from the state capital of Melbourne. Its traditional industries of agriculture, forestry and fishing are slowly shifting towards health, education and tourism, creating precarious employment or unemployment for those seeking work in primary industries. While western Gippsland is more affluent and, especially at its western edges, almost an extension of peri-urban Melbourne, it is also undergoing changes in employment patterns following the closure of the State Electricity Commission, a major employer, and as more small dairy farms are brought under the umbrella of large corporations. Across both western and East Gippsland, there is a predominance

of technicians, trade workers and labourers and generational unemployment remains a defining characteristic of many areas in Gippsland, especially in East Gippsland.

Across Gippsland young people's current patterns of education show little sign of disrupting this trend. They are less likely to complete schooling than their metropolitan counterparts and are also less likely to acquire upper tertiary qualifications. In 2011, a higher proportion of the Gippsland population held certificate level qualifications than the Melbourne and Victorian average, but a much lower proportion held higher education qualifications (Dow et al. 2011).

Those young people who do complete school or go on to higher education are most likely to be young women. In 2011, only 63 per cent of young men in Gippsland were still at school at the start of Year 12, compared to 78.1 per cent of young women. This gender pattern is also evident at the tertiary level: two thirds of the student body at the Monash University Gippsland campus (now Federation University) is female (Dow et al. 2011).

Within these two broadly defined areas, the two case study participants, Simone and Ted<sup>1</sup>, were born and have grown up in distinct locales. Both 17 at the time of interview, they sat on the cusp of a life turning point (Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997, p. 39). Simone was completing Year 12 and Ted Year 11 and they had both made significant choices in light of their imagined futures. Simone had selected her preferred courses and universities and was awaiting her VCE results. Ted had decided to remain at school and complete year 12 after wanting to leave school earlier in the year. He had been persuaded to stay by 'a few people' from school, home and 'all around'—an early indication of his extensive contacts and networks.

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<sup>1</sup>their chosen pseudonyms



Ted and Simone also share a similar small rural village early childhood, as well as some similarities in family setting and dynamic, personal capacities and a clearly imagined career pathway that envisions leaving the family home and neighborhood and includes international travel. These similarities facilitate a nuanced comparative analysis of gender and locality based influences on their respective decisions.

### **Horizons of aspiration from the high country and the Valley**

Both Simone and Ted grew up and currently live in the family home. Since birth Ted has lived in a satellite village to the township of Orbost in East Gippsland, which has a population of around 2500 people. Orbost is a gateway to both the high country and the wide and beautiful mouth of the Snowy River. Ted attended primary school in the village and has travelled the approximately ten minute drive to Orbost Secondary College, a government school of around 290 students, since Year 7.

Simone also lives in the family home, which, until the age of seven was located in a very small and isolated bush settlement where she attended primary school. Her family then moved into Churchill, a township of around 5000 people in western Gippsland, where they still live today. Churchill is located in the Latrobe Valley, known for open cut coal mining, coal fired power stations and other heavy industry such as the Australian Paper Mill. Simone currently attends the senior campus of Kurnai Secondary College, a government secondary school of around 1266 students, co-located on the Gippsland Education Precinct with Federation University and GippsTAFE.

Both Simone and Ted live with their two parents and two siblings of the same gender. Ted has younger brothers of 14 and 11 years. Simone has a twin sister and an older

sister, one school year ahead. In both sets of siblings there is one with particular academic capabilities. Ted's 14 year-old brother won a scholarship to a private boarding school in central Gippsland in Year 8 and attends as a weekly boarder; university is on his 'horizon of aspiration'. Ted's younger brother at 11 is understandably uncertain about his horizons. Simone's older sister is currently studying nursing through TAFE and 'loving it' and her twin sister is hoping to achieve a beauty therapy or dental nursing traineeship. Neither aspire to leave the area. Simone, on the other hand, was selected for the Advanced Learning Program (ALPs) when she entered high school and aspires to study a Bachelor of Education Health/Sport Sciences at the Burwood campus (Eastern suburbs of Melbourne) of Deakin University.

Ted, likewise, sees his immediate post school future as leaving home and the area to take up an internship as a Stock Agent in another regional centre anywhere in Victoria. He mentioned Ballarat and Warrnambool (large centres in central west and western Victoria) but he noted 'anything can happen' and the actual location would be determined by securing an internship.

It is notable that both Simone and Ted formed strong aspirations at an early age and they share the capacity to focus, plan and strategise steps towards achieving their well-formed goals. Simone described gaining motivation from sibling rivalry and parental approval:

I pushed myself into ALPs, ...in Grade 5 and 6 I struggled a lot academically, I asked for extra homework but I pushed myself up the ranks, I pushed myself to get places because...this is going to sound really bad, but I looked at my older sister and I looked and I didn't want that. She didn't try hard enough she didn't really care, and for me...I didn't

want that, like I pushed myself at home, like I did more chores – I still do do the most chores – in sport I push harder and aim for higher...but in the same factor its to make my parents proud. I want them to be proud of me and I want them to tell all their friends...

Ted indicates that as a child he was very influenced by his stock agent grandfather and others in the trade:

From a young, about 7 or 8, I used to go with him all the time and you get to that 12 or 13 age and you think the younger blokes are way better so you go with them and I learn a lot more with the younger agents. I drove around with them and drafted a lot of cattle–did a lot of work, met a lot of new people, so that sort of set me right off with it.

Ted has a high level of self-sufficiency, determination and strategic direction. He has an enterprising spirit and is already purchasing a house to rent out for financial security. He asserts:

If you want to go somewhere you need to sort of do it yourself, you can't rely on other people...and that's where I think a lot of people fall wrong – they just think its going to happen, well you've gotta go out and actually make it happen.

Despite their determination and strategic direction, both Ted and Simone have 'horizons' that are shaped by their socio-spatial locations and that affect their capacity for imagined futures (Sellar & Gale, 2011). Ted is very much following in family tradition in entering the cattle industry and his ambitions draw directly from his life experiences in a cattle-farming community. Although Simone's educational and career ambitions reach beyond the experiences and ambitions of her family her

horizons are also limited by a geographical habitus. Although keen to leave the Latrobe Valley, Simone's preferences were to relocate to another regional centre, rather than to the city setting of Melbourne, something which affected the university choices available to her and reflects her 'social window' (Mookherjee, Ray & Napel, 2010, Gale et al, 2013).

Both Ted and Simone feel well supported by their family in their career choices, particularly by their fathers. But it is at this point that subtle influences of gender appear to come into play in defining aspirational horizons. Both Ted and Simone aspire to gender traditional roles, with teaching a field that has high rates of female participation, whilst cattle-running is a traditionally male-dominated field. Simone's narrative illustrates that of many of the young women in the study who aspired to higher education as a way of moving out of their socio-economic and geographical locations, however, they tended to do this through the choice of traditionally gendered course choices in regional (usually local) rather than metropolitan universities.

When we first met Simone she wanted to study in Geelong, a major regional centre west of Melbourne. By our second meeting she had instead selected a campus in Burwood, about a two-hour drive from her home, and she now envisaged returning home most weekends. When asked about her earlier choice of Geelong she reported her father's colourful response:

“Shit Simone, how far away do you want to go?”...Like he was kind of shocked by my choice there...and he's just like, “I see why you want to do it but are you sure you're making the right decision?” Like he's very on my case about if it's right, if it's what I want to do, “Have you researched it and all that?”

The clear impression is that her father has shaped Simone's horizons. She is the first in her family to aspire to university so she, and they, are entering uncharted waters. While she says it is 'a whole new adventure', leaving home is at the same time her 'biggest fear at the moment'. Simone is therefore hoping to secure on campus accommodation saying 'it's independent but its also kind of sheltered', a statement that has the resonance of a parent of a daughter not yet 18. Although gender is largely missing from the literature on rurality and post-school transitions, Simone's case was in many ways illustrative of the choices of other young women in the study, whose horizons were often limited by family ties and expectations from family that they would stay geographically close to home.

In contrast, Ted would pack up 'today if I had to'. He says: 'It's not that I want to get out of town or anything' but that's its not daunting. His father has encouraged him and he feels he has—what Appadurai (2004) would call 'navigational—capacity' to tap into networks he has built up as a seasoned traveller of the region and regional Victoria, through his hobby of rearing and showing cattle at agricultural shows, and through shadowing stock agents for many years:

I just think...over the last five/six years... I've met a lot of people and the networking I can do and Dad has pushed me in that direction, like he said 'oh you could be good at it' just because of the way I can talk to people and I know my stuff.

For Ted, and for other young men in the study, education was less important as a means to geographical mobility. A gendered preference for vocational and trades-based career paths gave them confidence that their skills would afford them work in a variety of places, including the facility of straddling 'home and away' through 'flying in and flying out' employment in other parts of Australia. Imagining a future that

embraced skilled occupational identities in traditional male trades gave young men like Ted perceived choice as to their geographical position.

At this point in their lives, both Simone and Ted envision career facilitated international travel although Ted presents this ambition in more concrete ways than Simone that suggests he has built the social networks and social capital to realize his goal. Ted sees himself travelling to Canada through a contact he made at the Melbourne Show; spending two weeks on a stud farm in New Zealand through a scholarship he won; and travelling around Australia seeing all things cattle. He says, career and travel wise, 'anything to do with cattle farming—I'm in'. Simone envisions basing herself as a teacher in London for a year and using holidays to visit Europe following the suggestion of a teacher she spoke to who 'has been over there and taught', though she has no contacts or networks in Europe to support this mobility. Nevertheless, for both Simone and Ted, encounters with others who have experience outside their relatively isolated geographic location have been instrumental in shaping their ambitions and broadening their horizons, experiences which, as Mills & Gale (2008) also note, are crucial in forming young people's aspirations.

In their imagined futures, both, however, see themselves as returning to Victoria, though there is a gendered difference in how close to their place of origin they would return. Ted sees himself returning to Orbost to take up the reins on the family dairy farm, although clearly he is leaving the window of serendipitous opportunity open, saying 'you can't ever plan your future' but that hopefully he would 'come back here and take over the dairy—eventually'. Simone is in no doubt that her idea of a good life rules out returning to the Valley:

I love Victoria. I really do. Like its where I grew up, I have so many memories but in saying that I don't want to live in Churchill—it's limited opportunities here.

She describes her locale with a powerful image:

A lot of people see Churchill, or even Gippsland, as a hole. And literally if you look at the landscape it is, we're at the bottom, there's mountains around us.

## **Conclusion**

Simone's horizons appear to be somewhat hemmed in by what she has 'seen' within and from the confines of the surrounding mountains. Her influencers are her parents and teachers. Her career choice is linked to her 'archive of experience', which to this point has revolved predominantly around school. Her story tells of a young woman working doggedly, step by step, to climb her way out of a geographical 'hole', a goal both encouraged and bounded by her father's own imagined horizons for his daughter.

In the words of Sellar and Gale (2011, p. 121) noted above, her 'capacity to imagine certain possibilities as being desirable' has been limited to that viewable from both the protectiveness of a loving home and the limits of a gendered view from a Valley. Simone is not quite able to know or see what else might be up there or out there and so utilizing her own talents and interests she can see herself like her teachers and this is reflected in her choice of university course and location.

Ted's horizons on the other hand appear both grounded in the land and the working practices that he knows well. Yet these practices are worldwide and being enacted by young men that Ted has already encountered and Ted regards them as providing

opportunities that are geographically limitless. In topographical contrast, his story is one of expansive horizons from an elevated high-country vantage point. His chosen career, or vocation, has seen him develop networks and contacts with a global reach, whilst still being shaped by his geographical setting.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) observe that career ‘decision-making was context-related, and could not be separated from the family background, culture and life histories’ (p. 33). In Ted and Simone’s stories of their imagined futures, we can see their careers are based on the familiar; their family background and life histories to date are writ large over their choices. But to the contexts listed by Hodkinson and Sparkes, on the basis of these two case studies, we would add into the ‘complex constellation of conditions and circumstances’, influences of gender and a response to the topography of place in which, and from where, aspirations are being formed and decisions are being made. These influences would suggest that the role of gender is one that needs greater attention in the context of rurality and post-school transitions. As important, is the notion that the effects of rurality are very geographically specific and affected by topography, local industry and opportunities and that a more nuanced understanding of young people’s post-school choices is needed beyond a simple dichotomy of rural/urban.

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