Abstract

Based upon research commissioned to gauge the effectiveness of a supplementary education program in Karratha, a resource “boom town” in the North of Western Australia, the paper focuses on the response by parents to a perceived lack of commitment to formal schooling and higher education amongst high school students in the town. Concerns amongst families with high levels of a Higher Education Family Tradition (HEFT), living in a town with unusually high levels of families of high income but low HEFT background, lead to a distrust of local secondary schools, compounding the difficulties the schools experience in retaining academically focused students. A more inclusive approach to education than is currently evident is needed, one that does not equate successful education with leaving the town, but does not also compromise on offering a broad range of educational opportunities to the young people faced with the realities of growing up in an Australian resource boomtown.
Table 1: Degree of under-representation of groups in Australian Higher Education, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>2007 Participation Rate % in Higher Education</th>
<th>Proportion in General Population %</th>
<th>2007 Participation Ratio¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-English Speaking Background</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Regional</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source Australian Government 2008: 28)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>TAFE</th>
<th>Total Tertiary Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Great Southern</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Great Southern</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Eastern</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilbara</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberley</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL WA</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source Australian Government 2008, Appendix 2)
Figure 1 Two Dimensions of Social Class

High HEFT

Low Income

High Income

Low HEFT
Taking on the Role of Learning in a Rural Town: A Western Australian Case Study

Abstract

Based upon research commissioned to gauge the effectiveness of a supplementary education program in Karratha, a resource “boom town” in the North of Western Australia, the paper focuses on the response by parents to a perceived lack of commitment to formal schooling and higher education amongst high school students in the town. Concerns amongst families with high levels of a Higher Education Family Tradition (HEFT), living in a town with unusually high levels of families of high income but low HEFT background, lead to a distrust of local secondary schools, compounding the difficulties the schools experience in retaining academically focused students. A more inclusive approach to education than is currently evident is needed, one that does not equate successful education with leaving the town, but does not also compromise on offering a broad range of educational opportunities to the young people faced with the realities of growing up in an Australian resource boomtown.

Taking up Educational Opportunities in Resource Boom Town

Western Australia, the state in which the lived dimensions of this piece of social research is situated, is vast. It is also spectacularly metro-centric. Occupying more than 2.5 million km², close to 75% of the state’s population reside in the capital city of Perth. These simple geographic and demographic facts raise difficult dilemmas for planners charged with attracting residents and workers to many of the rural and remote towns strewn throughout WA (Tonts 2004). I have argued elsewhere in relation to autonomy for government schools (Forsey 2009) and devolutionary reform in Western Australia (Forsey 2004) that size and distance matter in significant ways, a relationship that extends easily to considerations of educational opportunities and outcomes.

It is sociologically orthodox to argue that socio-cultural and spatial differences strongly influence educational outcomes. A recent media headline picked up a political push to address these sorts of issues when in April 2011 the recently appointed Minister for Education in the New South Wales government announced that he had put the closing of the
education gap between rural and urban students on the national agenda. Consistent with recent government reports, the Minister argued that the problem is entrenched and growing.

This is not the place to go into the finer points of the arguments surrounding what is a controversial arena of academic and political debate; noteworthy, however, is his assertion, based on OECD data, that children in rural schools in Australia are now one and a half years behind city students in terms of basic academic achievements. A colleague of the Minister in the NSW Government echoed these thoughts, commenting that the lack of achievement amongst rural students is attributable to “first off getting kid's to school and after that, getting them to cooperate in the classroom and take on the process of learning.” (ABC News 2011).

This paper picks up the theme of taking up educational opportunities in rural towns through research commissioned to check the effectiveness of a significant ameliorative education programme in the resource “boom town” of Karratha, in the far north of Western Australia. Called the Karratha Education Initiative (KEI), the programme was forged from a partnership between a global mining conglomerate – the North West Shelf Venture and the two secondary schools in the town – Karratha Senior High School and St Luke’s Catholic College. Tasked with researching the efficacy of the KEI, in the second half of 2010 I spent four weeks in the town in two separate fortnightly periods. I accessed both schools, met with some key officials from the company and local government, and most significantly interviewed 25 parents, 18 teachers and many more students. I do not consider the KEI in any depth here. Instead, the focus shifts to a significant aspect of the reason for the setting up of the project, namely parental concerns about the ways in which the socio-economic realities of life in a resource rich “boom town” affect the willingness of Karratha’s high school students to embrace the opportunities presented by formal schooling.
The Exclusions of the Rural

Despite the mythical resonances of Australia with “the bush” (see Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999:225), defining the rural is a vexed question (see Moriarty, Danaher and Danaher 2003). In Western Australia at least it still valid to refer back to the Australian schools commission report of 1987 for an accurate representation of commonsense understandings of “the rural”, as ‘being all of the nation excluding … greater metropolitan regions and, generally, areas within 50km of these regions’. In the case of Western Australia, anywhere beyond the immediate reaches of Perth is usually considered “rural”.

A recent review of higher education undertaken by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) notes that while participation in higher education in general has increased over the past decade, and considerable progress has been made in accessibility for women, other groups remain seriously under-represented in higher education (Australian Government 2008:27). The key target groups for increased participation identified by the Bradley Report were students from backgrounds of low SES, non-English speaking background, those with a disability, from rural and remote areas as well as Indigenous persons (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Interestingly, in the period 2002-2007, participation for all key target groups rose, except for those from rural and remote Australia.
Narrowing the focus from the national to the state scene, the data of Table 2 show, show university participation rates in Western Australia decline quite dramatically the further one moves away from Perth, figures that are consistent with national trends.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Taking on the Process of Learning in a Resource Boomtown

‘Karratha is not the sort of town you can arrive in and think, ‘oh this is a lovely town, I could live here for the rest of my life. I don’t think so’. (Parent of two, currently living in Perth)

A recent government report (Government of Western Australia 2010) commented that Karratha had a higher than usual ‘resident churn factor’. At the time of the 2006 national census ‘approximately 56 and 24 per cent of Karratha residents lived at their current address one and five years ago respectively, compared to 75 per cent and 48 per cent for the State’. One of the factors driving the KEI was a concern identified by the partners of the North West Shelf Venture (NWSV) regarding their high staff turnover, which in the late 2000’s was estimated to cost up to $15m annually. Surveys conducted at the time indicated quality of education to be a major cause of this “employee churn”, with key issues identified as teacher quality, student academic performance and curriculum choice, particularly in upper school.

The transition to high school is a touchstone period for parents deciding whether to stay or leave the town. Although it is difficult to locate any exact figures assessing the truth of this local piece of commonsense, significant numbers apparently choose to exit at this point in their family lifespan. Many of the parents and teachers I spoke with readily acknowledged that Karratha offers extraordinary opportunities to students seeking to take up a trade when they leave school. The apprenticeship system available through organisations such as the
NWSV is of high quality and the general perception of the people I interviewed is that it is relatively easy for the young people to access the rich rewards on offer through the local resource extraction industries.

When it comes to access to higher education, however, parents have a different view about the opportunities available to their children. As already indicated in Table 2, Western Australian teenagers living outside of Perth are statistically vulnerable to exclusion from access to higher education. Debates about the causes of this are many and varied, but the NSW politician quoted above points also to factors that are more difficult to account for using normal statistical measures. In discussing student readiness to take on learning he is referring to what those of us familiar with Bourdieu’s work will recognise as cultural capital. Issues of class-based inclusion and exclusion extend beyond socio-economic status to issues of cultural inheritance associated with formal education. Children born into families with a “higher education family tradition” (HEFT) are more likely to be imbued with the cultured study habits valorized, rewarded and re-produced through schooling.

**Insert Figure about here**

Karratha helps illustrate one of the difficulties often associated with class analysis in contemporary industrialized societies, in that, as with most resource extraction towns, it has more people earning higher than average incomes but also has more people with lower than average formal qualifications. In other words, as illustrated in figure 1, Karratha is a place with an unusually high proportion of children who fit into the fourth quadrant of the chart, those from High Income, Low HEFT families. The inflated proportion of the population in this grouping, relative to the Australian population as a whole, alerts us to the significance of
class habitus and the exclusionary *practices* this can produce, not only in and by teachers, but also in students themselves (see Corbett 2007). The perceptions of schooling produced by these realities often compound the sorts of educational dilemmas apparently produced by higher than usual low HEFT students in the classroom.

One group of parents I met with were those who recently moved to Perth having lived in Karratha for a number of years. In seeking to find out why they left, concerns about high school education emerged as a key theme. As a mother of two primary school children put it, whilst reflecting on the ways in which Karratha attracts people looking to earn a lot of money in a short period of time, ‘without a doubt the well educated people coming up for a stint in the town, come up while the kids are young’. She went on to suggest that the secondary schools are not going to attract the children of these ‘well educated people’ as long as they are not able to guarantee a critical mass of able students completing school and sitting the Tertiary Entrance Examinations (TEE) at the end of Year 12. As she put it, ‘you are not going to get TEE results unless you have got students sitting Year 11 and 12. And you are not going to get students sitting Year 11 and 12 unless their parents, who are tertiary educated feel encouraged and reassured, that what’s on offer is good enough’.

Karratha’s distance from the metropole and the issues of teacher turnover compound the difficulties associated with retaining the children of the educated classes and those from blue-collar families with formal educational aspirations – those who help maintain the sort of academic ethos that promotes a commitment to formal education and university entrance. The compounding effects are circular and significant.
The KEI was aimed squarely at breaking the circle. It was born of an alliance between the man who was Principal of St Luke’s between 2006 and 2009, a four year tenure that was itself a minor miracle. The former principal spoke to me of his fascination with working out ‘how education could link in with what was a really culturally deprived place, in terms of what was on offer for people up there apart from work’. Focused on developing an awareness of what he called ‘education’s place in a civilised and civilising society’, Geoff identified as a key issue dealing with a population in which people were clearly there to earn a large amount of money quickly and where education was secondary to family career planning. He described a situation in which ‘we had this school that was trying to teach kids social justice issues and long-term education for education sake instead of just producing automatons for the mining industry’. One of the parents I interviewed who had chosen to stay on in the town through the course of her two sons’ high school, captures some of the dilemmas highlighted by Geoff.

Naomi, her husband and their two sons migrated to Australia in 2002. They went straight to Karratha, as ‘this is where the work was’. For the past eight years or so, Naomi focused more on the upbringing of her children than on paid employment. Her sons were both teenagers at the time I interviewed her in her new, relatively large home. Both were attending local Catholic schools, one in upper school at St Luke’s Secondary College, the other in the sole Catholic primary school of the town. Both, however, began their Australian education in government primary schools, mainly because they seem so much better resourced then.

Naomi captured the dilemmas faced by many a parent in reflecting upon how, in choosing to stay in the town and to have their children go through secondary school in Karratha, she and
her husband were “different from other residents”, or at least the ones she knew who shared similar levels of tertiary education to them:

... because our children, we’ve given them the option of boarding school. All along we’ve said to them, “if you want to go to boarding school”. And it’s a hard thing because a lot of people think the schools in Perth are definitely better and therefore they’re doing the right thing by sending their children. But I think a lot of education comes from home, and our children have said, “there’s no way they want to be away from us”, so that isn’t an option for them. And I'm quite happy to have them near me, but that means I’ve then got to take whatever education’s offered, whether it’s good or bad or indifferent. So it is challenging.

As Naomi sees it, her sons are receiving a very mixed education. Leaving town is not an option for them as her husband’s work is so specialised and they will not countenance the path of many of their colleagues in pursuing a “fly-in, fly-out” (FiFo) contract, which involves working away from home for an extended period of time. Naomi and her husband went through the FiFo experience in their home country, “we’ve done weeks of him being away and it’s not healthy for us’.

Not only were Naomi and her husband reluctant to pursue the FiFo option because of its effects on family life, they were also enjoying their lifestyle in Karratha. Naomi’s family have assimilated into the community very well, and while the higher than usual wages available to them there makes boarding school a realistic enough option, it is far from ideal. Not only would it significantly disrupt family life, the loss of many of the aspects of living in a small coastal community would be a significant blow to all of them.

Learning to Stay

In his engaging analysis of the ways in which rural education in Canada is fixated on encouraging students to ultimately leave their towns to pursue opportunities elsewhere, Corbett (2007) describes how many teachers oppose any sense of attachment to place. In his
view they actively subvert local knowledge in the interests of a form of liberal democracy, which is often expressed in terms of ‘broadening the horizons or rural children and youth’ (p.10). This sort of thinking pervades educational policy in a number of ways, and is evident in the ways in which the likes of the earlier mentioned Bradley Report, the Review of Australian Higher Education, problematises the under-representation of rural youth in Australian universities (Australian Government 2008). This is not to say that rural youth should not be given the opportunities offered by higher education, but as one of the mothers I interviewed suggested, it is disturbing that schooling is not focused on “retaining our kids here, so our families aren’t broken, that our families don’t have to send them to boarding school or send them off to university”.

In expressing the desire for education policy makers and planners to present the children of the town with at least some opportunities that can be actually delivered in Karratha, Liz’s concerns resonates with the work of Witherspoon (1998). In his study of the sustainability of rural communities in Saskatchewan, he observed how ‘escalating demands for educational credentials’ have created the conditions in which ‘educational success means that youth must leave their communities in order to pursue opportunities for higher education and meaningful employment’ (p.138). Schools, which are so often represented as the guarantor of the future for many a rural township, are in fact a ‘gateway that channels valuable human resources out of these communities and into urban centers’ (p.138).

Corbett (2007:23) argues from the point of at least some of the people he has met living in rural communities, that schools should pay far greater attention to providing opportunities that do not exacerbate de-population and out-migration. Insofar as Karratha is a place where economic opportunities are not only very evident, they are often more bountiful than those
offered in more populous areas, it is an unusual rural space. This reality offers hope that the KEI could in fact lose at least some of its exclusive concerns with university entrance in favour of the broader educational vision promised in its original business plan (see Forsey 2011). This way a commitment to a more inclusive inclusivity could be reached, that does not have to compromise on offering a broad range of educational opportunities to the young people faced with the realities of growing up in an Australian resource boomtown. This sort of approach might allow more students to find ways of taking on the role of learning in a variety of appropriate and life affirming ways.

References


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1 Technical and Further Education
A conglomerate of five companies comprising of BHP Billiton Petroleum, British Petroleum, Chevron, Japan-Australia LNG, Shell, and Woodside Energy