

Understanding the geographies of educational aspiration on mobilities and widening participation

Webb Sue, *Monash University, Australia*

## Part 2 Outline

*I love Victoria. I really do. Like it's where I grew up, I have so many memories but in saying that I don't want to live in Westvale—it's limited opportunities here...(Simone, 17 years of age)*

Simone was a participant in a recent study conducted in Australia exploring young people's decision-making and choices about their post-school transitions to education or work. Her account of her intentions to progress to university invoked ambivalence and powerful feelings of attachment towards the place and community where she has grown up alongside recognition of the need (and desire) to be mobile and leave the place she loves. Simone lives in an area of traditional industries dominated by mining and power generation alongside farming and forestry several hours distance from the state capital. In this area a much lower proportion of people than in the state of Victoria or the average for the capital city, Melbourne, have higher education qualifications and those young people who do complete school or go on to higher education are most likely to be young women (Dow et al. 2011). In 2011, only 63 per cent of young men were still at school at the start of Year 12, compared to 78.1 per cent of young women (Dow et al. 2011).

*Over the past two decades research on post-school transitions and on access and participation in higher education has identified the complex interplay of social factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity on young people's decision-making and choices (see for example Ball et al. 2000; Ball et al. 2002; Burke, 2005, 2012; Reay et al. 2001; Webb, 1997). Increasingly, geographers have extended the concern with spatiality set by the Bourdieusian concepts of habitus and field and argued for the geographies of education (Taylor, 2009) informed by 'the spatial turn' (Massey, 1999, p11) and the recognition that space is socially constructed (Soja, 1989). Others have called for a conversation about the emotional geographies of education, which they call a socio-cultural-spatial analyses of education and emotion (Kenway & Youdell, 2011). The recognition that spaces can be places of belonging (Hinton, 2011), resistance (Bright, 2011) or risk (Clayton et al. 2009) adds new dimensions to the concept of horizons for action that has been used to understand the self-imposed limits on what an individual considers possible (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and to Ball et al's. (2002) concepts of 'normal biography' and 'a choice biography' to account for differences of class and place in young people's transitions.*

Policies specifically designed for reducing place-based inequalities have not until recently had as high a priority in Australia as in other countries such as the United States (Gregory and Hunter, 1995) or the UK (Batty et al. 2010) where geographical aspects of disadvantage have long been acknowledged (Dorling, 2010; 2011). Yet, there is increasing evidence and concern about the spatial concentration of disadvantage (see for example the Bradley Review of Higher Education, 2008).

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). Richardson & Friedman (2010) have also identified some distinctive characteristics and experiences of students from regional (beyond metropolitan) areas. For example, students from regional areas are more likely on leaving school to enter the workforce or vocational education than those from metropolitan locations; if studying at a regional institution, they are more likely to be female, studying part-time and enrolled in a vocational education institution. They are also more likely to be older than the school leaver cohort when entering university (Richardson & Friedman, 2010). Consequently, 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).

Clearly, geography can have far reaching effects on people's lives and opportunities, but arguably people mediate spaces and places in the ways they live their lives. What is less well understood is how these processes work and whether we need place-based or person-based strategies or a mixture to solve geographical and social and educational inequalities (Griggs et al. 2008). Smyth & McInerney (2013, p2) contend that before considering policy solutions, the policy problem needs to be reconceptualised, they state: '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.' Taking up this idea, one way to reconceptualise the problem is to explore post-school transitions through research that has the capacity to understand people's everyday life worlds (Meegan and Mitchell, 2001) because as Lupton (2010, p117) has argued place-based interventions have become conceptually confused and 'failed to make it clear whether it is really places they were targeting, individuals or schools'.

*This paper contributes to a socio-cultural and spatial understanding of the geographies of educational inequalities in post-school participation in vocational education and training and university study in the context of Australia. It discusses findings from a study funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) to explore the geographic dimensions of social exclusion in four locations in Victoria and South Australia. The main research question addressed was, 'How do individuals live their lives in neighbourhoods of socio-economic disadvantage, make decisions about where, how and with whom they spend their time and imagine their education and work futures?' A qualitative case study approach was used to understand the perceptions and experiences of growing up in areas of social disadvantage on urban fringes and in relatively remote regional and rural places. Conceptually, a Bourdieusan framework was also drawn on to inform the research design and analysis. Data was collected at three levels – the state level with respect to policies and practices in two states; the institutional level with respect to the perspectives and practices of educational organizations, including schools, colleges and universities and other non-governmental organisations working with young people (interviews with 52 stakeholders); and at the level of young people*

(though focus groups – 24 people in the school student group in 4 areas and 28 in the post school in four areas and 16 individual interviews with people from both groups). These different levels of data collection and thematic analysis enabled identification of the different fields of power and social networks young people moved through in developing their habitus and resources (capitals) for particular 'horizons for action'. Findings reinforce the finding of earlier studies that there is no single determinant of education aspirations. There are local factors that encourage young people to remain in their place, as well as state and national education policies that expect them to be mobile in search of wider opportunities for education and employment. But by drawing on the pragmatic localised rationalities and affective identifications with place and being, the 'choices' young people make about how to live, learn and work cannot be reduced to simple or deficit explanations of rurality and socio-economic disadvantage.

## References

- Ball, S, Macrae, S, Maguire, M, (2000), *Choice, pathways, and transitions post-16 : new youth, new economies in the global city London*: Routledge - Falmer.
- Ball, S, Davies, J, David, M & Reay, D, (2002), "'Classification" and "judgement": social class and the "cognitive structures" of choice of higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol.23, no.1, pp.51-72.
- Batty, E, Beatty, C, Foden, M, Lawless, P, Pearson, S & Wilson, I 2010, *The New Deal for Communities Experience: A final assessment*, Department for Communities and Local Government, UK, London.
- Baum, S, Mitchell, W & Han, JH 2008, 'Socio-economic performance across Australia's non-metropolitan functional economic regions', *Australasian Journal of Regional Studies*, vol.14, no.3, pp.215-249.
- Baum, S, Stimson, R, O'Connor, K, Mullins, P & Davis, R 1999, *Community opportunity and vulnerability in Australia's cities and towns*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Brisbane.
- Bloomer, M & Hodkinson, P 2000, 'Learning careers: continuity and change in young people's dispositions to learning', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol.26, no.5, pp. 583–598.
- Bradley, D 2008, *Review of Australian higher education. Final report*, Canberra: Australian Government. Viewed: 14.2.2014 [www.deewr.gov.au/he\\_review\\_finalreport](http://www.deewr.gov.au/he_review_finalreport)
- Bradley, D. 2008 *Review of Australian higher education. Final report*, Canberra
- Bright, N.G. (2011) 'Off the Model': resistant spaces, school disaffection and 'aspiration' in a former coal-mining community, *Children's Geographies*, 9:1, 63-78
- Burke, P. J. (2005) Access and Widening Participation Book Review, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 26, No. 4 pp. 555-562
- Burke, P. J. (2012) *The right to higher education beyond widening participation*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Byron, I 2010, 'Place-based approaches to addressing disadvantage', *Family Matters*, vol.84, pp.20-27.
- Clayton, J, Crozier, G & Reay, D (2009) *Home and away: risk, familiarity and the multiple geographies of the higher education experience*, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, Vol 19 Nos. 3-4, 157-174
- Dorling, D., 2010. *Injustice: Why social inequality persists*. Bristol:Policy Press.
- Dorling, D., 2011. *Fair play: A Danny Dorling Reader on social justice*, Bristol: Policy Press.

- Dow, KL, Allan, M & Mitchell, J 2011, *Gippsland tertiary education plan*, Skills Victoria, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, Vic, Australia. Viewed 14.2.2014.  
[www.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.education.vic.gov.au)
- Fuller, A, Heath, S, Johnston, B, (eds) (2011) *Rethinking Widening Participation in Higher Education: the role of social networks*. London: Routledge
- Gregory, B & Hunter, B 1995, 'The macro economy and the growth of ghettos and urban poverty in Australia', *Discussion Paper No. 325, Australian National University, Canberra*.
- Griggs, J, Whitworth, A, Walker, R, McLennan, D & Noble, M 2008, *Person or place-based policies to tackle disadvantage? Not knowing what works*, Report of Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Heath, S, Fuller, A, & Paton, K, (2008) Network-based ambivalence and educational decision-making: a case study of 'non-participation' in higher education, *Research Papers in Education*, 23:2, 219-229
- Hinton, D, (2011) 'Wales is my home': higher education aspirations and students mobilities in Wales, *Children's Geographies*, 9:1, 23-34
- Hodkinson, P, & Sparkes, A, 1997, *Careership: A Sociological Theory of Career Decision Making* British Journal of Sociology of Education, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 29-44
- Kenway, J, Youdell, D, (2011) The emotional geographies of education: Beginning a conversation, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4, 131-136
- Lupton, R. 2010. 'Area-based Initiatives in English Education: What Place for Place and space? In *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries*, edited by C. Raffo, A. Dyson, H. Gunter, D.Hall, L. Jones and A. Kalambouka , 111-123 New York, NY: Routledge.
- Massey, D, (1999) Negotiating Disciplinary Boundaries, *Current Sociology*, 47(40), 5-12
- Meegan, R., & Mitchell, A., 2001. "It's not community round here, it's neighbourhood": Neighbourhood Change and Cohesion in Urban Regeneration Policies, *Urban Studies* 38 (12): 2167-2194.
- Randolph, B 2004, 'Social inclusion and place-focused initiatives in western Sydney', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol.39, no.1, pp.63-78.
- Richardson, S & Friedman, T 2010, *Australian regional higher education: student characteristics and experiences*, Australian Council for Educational Research & DEEWR, Canberra.
- Reay, D, Davies, J, David, M & Ball, SJ 2001, 'Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, 'race' and the higher education choice process', *Sociology*, vol.35, no.4, pp.855-874.
- Smyth, J & McInerney, P 2013, 'Making 'space': young people put at a disadvantage re-engaging with learning', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol.34, no.1, pp.39-55.
- Soja, E, (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: the reassertion of space in critical theory* London: Verso.
- Taylor, C. (2009) Towards a geography of education, *Oxford Review of Education*, 35:5, 651-669
- Webb, S. (1997) 'Alternative Students? Conceptualisations of Difference', pp. 65 -87, in Williams, J. (ed.) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: The Discourse of Selectivity and Equity*, Buckingham: Open University Press