

# The Transition to Higher Education from Isolated Rural Coastal Communities: A Canadian Case Study (0006)

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## Summary

This paper emerges from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada/Community-University Research Alliance<sup>1</sup> project whose aim was to improve the social and economic development of multiple coastal communities<sup>2</sup> in British Columbia. The survival of isolated rural/coastal communities is housed in the relationship between education and both social and physical mobility. Sociologists have since the beginning of the discipline focused attention on links between industrialization and urbanization. They have been concerned with the destruction of rural communities as the centre draws in people from the periphery (Papastergiardis, 2000; Matthews, 1976; Matthews, et. al., 1999). The focus here is upon the relation between economic, cultural and community capital (Bourdieu, 1988 and 1991).

This paper is a case-study of the Bella Coola Valley (BCV) which is located in the central coastal region of British Columbia. The relation between education and mobility is made more complex in our study given the presence of both Aboriginal and civic communities in the BCV. Place and traditional culture play a significant role for the Nuxalk nation when it comes to education and mobility decisions. Whether young people stay, leave or return to their communities emerges primarily from the complex relation that ties culture, education and work together (Lucas, 1971; Looker and Dwyer, 1998; Corbett, 2007; Petrin, Schafft and Meece, 2014).

We adopted a mixed-methods case-study design involving documentary analysis and interviews. The documentary analysis includes school and school board records; local newspaper accounts; and, other community based educational documents. These documents were used as the basis for creating a historical account of educational offerings as well as the means for identifying the target population. This population includes all the young people who began their Grade 6 education starting from 1982/83 through to 1999/2000. We enrolled community members in a Joint UBC/Bella Coola Educational Research Committee. Our community partners (co-researchers) as well as the young members of the communities that we hired as research assistants were invaluable in helping to identify members of the target population.

Between 1989 and 2006, on average only 44 percent of the students in our target population graduated from high school. Over this same period, the average for males and females was 52 and 58 percent respectively and for Civic and First Nation students was 62.5 and 34 percent respectively. These trends are confirmed at the provincial level when we examine the

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1 Project Title: Resilience and Local Capacity Development in BC's Coastal Communities. CURA Grant Number: 833-2003-1024

2 The five communities are Sechelt, Bella Coola, Prince Rupert, Masset, Port Hardy and Port Albemi.

progress of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal students in public secondary schools in British Columbia. For students who entered Grade 8 in 1995, the graduation rate for Aboriginal students (receiving a Dogwood Certificate) five years later was 42 percent while for the Non-Aboriginal population the rate was 78 percent (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 7). Similarly, for the same two groups of students who entered Grade 8 in 2002, the comparable statistics for those who completed Grade 12 are 49 percent for Aboriginal students and 83 percent for Non-Aboriginal students. Within both populations the female students do better than the males. For Aboriginal students the rate of completion for females and males respectively was 53 percent and 44 percent. For Non-Aboriginal students, the parallel rates were 87 percent and 79 percent (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007, p.29). We completed 178 interviews (110 First Nation and 68 Civic) and categorized each interviewee as a Stayer, Leaver, Returner, Multiple Leaver and Returner and In Transition.

This study is further confirmation of the strong relationship between formal education and mobility. For young people in isolated, rural communities, the pursuit of higher education usually means physically leaving home and moving to a larger urban centre. Those that leave are then more likely to build their lives elsewhere primarily because there are no suitable jobs in their place of origin. As one interviewee put it:

Anybody who goes to university never comes back. There are no jobs except in medicine or teaching. (F97-536)

For those who do not obtain a Dogwood Certificate,<sup>3</sup> the chances of being able to leave are small. Over the 18 year period of our study, on average 30 students a year did not graduate with any form of Certificate. Of that number, on average 13 students a year did not reach Grade 10. The 'Stayers' identified in our study were most likely to be female and First Nation, who had not obtained a Dogwood, had taken on a variety of low-skilled, low-paying jobs and were unemployed or in some cases had either chosen or settled into being a mother and a homemaker. Family, friends, community, security and safety were extremely important reasons given for staying. A significant minority of interviewees (13/68) cited pregnancy during their school years as the major reason for staying. The 'Returners' identified in our study were most likely First Nation who had a Dogwood and who had originally left to gain more education or for a particular job. To return for some was a rejection of the outside world, the city and the anonymity of urban life. This positive decision was usually the result of a convergence of the desire for the security of small town life, the need to be near family and the offer of a job. Perhaps because of the geography of the BCV a persistent theme revolved around the notion of 'going out'. The large majority of all our interviewees had clear notions of what it meant to be 'here' in the Valley and 'there' on the outside.

The 'Leavers' identified in our study were most likely Civic, who had obtained a Dogwood, a higher education credential and were working in a professional or skilled job. The total group included eight who had a Bachelor's degree in hand (two of this group had a Master's degree) and six others were enrolled in degree programs.<sup>4</sup> As with almost all those who leave the

<sup>3</sup> This is the official high school graduation certificate awarded by the province of British Columbia.

<sup>4</sup> In the total sample of 178 interviewees only 8 had a degree in hand and another 9 were en route to graduation. This represents a success rate of less than 10 percent.

BCV (including the ‘Returners’, the ‘Multiple Leavers and Returners’ and those ‘In Transition’) the key reasons for leaving was to further their education and/or to get a better job. Three interviews cited in-school pregnancies as a contributing reason for leaving. For a minority the key reason was the desire to experience the larger world. While the majority (29/53) would like to return to the BCV if only to retire, a significant minority (17/53) had no intention of returning. The MLRs identified in our study were most likely to be female and First Nation, who had obtained a Dogwood and had gone onto some higher education. Five interviewees cited in-school pregnancies as a contributing reason for their movement back and forth.<sup>5</sup> Again a significant minority (10/22) were clear that they would not settle back in the Valley.

As noted earlier, the interviewees adopted a way of thinking about their physical surroundings as being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the Valley. Alongside this physical division of their environment was for the vast majority a clear sense of belonging to this place which involved an emotional attachment to the beauty of the Valley and what it meant to be part of a tight knit community. For some of the Nuxalk respondents this attachment was deeply integrated with their cultural traditions and their language. More than two thirds of the sample stated clearly that they would like to settle permanently in the Valley if only to retire. The majority of this group would return if there was a job. In these ways, the vast majority had accumulated what we are labelling ‘community’ capital in that they loved the place and the sense of belonging to a community, whether indigenous or Civic. Community capital we suggest is a mix of the capital that accrues because of family, friendship and community ties which in turn are embedded in the beauty of the physical space where these ties are housed. This form of capital engenders a deep sense of belonging. At the same time around one sixth of the interviewees (approximately 30/178) had decided they could not return or settle in the Valley. Almost all the interviewees made the connection between education and the possibility of getting a ‘good’ job. The vast majority also expressed their desire to further their education to achieve this objective.

In trying to understand the transition into higher education for young people in rural, isolated settings it is clear that we must take account of the power of community capital. For a majority the risk associated with even the chance to pursue higher education is too great. A ‘destination’ that includes higher education means leaving the Valley. The unequal outcomes for all the students when compared to the larger population and in particular for the First Nation students will continue to be reproduced without direct and targeted interventions.

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<sup>5</sup> In the total sample of interviewees, 21 respondents referred to an early pregnancy as a contributing factor to their educational and vocational decision-making.

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