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Exploring Students' Feelings of Place

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Abstract

Geographically unequal distribution of opportunities for participation in post-school education particularly affects young people in rural and regional areas of Australia. This study contends that the perception of opportunities by young people from low socio-economic status backgrounds should be considered alongside the distribution of opportunities, in order to understand how place and social mobility are intertwined in the reproduction of inequality. Drawing on data about post-school transitions in peri-urban and rural areas of Australia, our study shows that understandings of a sense of belonging to a rural place of origin and the attraction of nature and the outdoors are intrinsic to understanding young people's educational mobilities.

Despite a growing interest in the more emotional aspects of mobility, including the concept of 'emotional topographies' and issues of dislocation and belonging, the spatial contingency of student identities and their effects on participation are only just beginning to be manifested in an ontological shift in scholarship. Educational mobilities and the sense of place have been tested by the impact of the 2020 global pandemic. By deepening understanding of how students from rural areas frame their educational choices, this study offers a progression in thinking about dislocation and belonging in the interactions of post-school transitions. Arguably, a broader emotional geographical sense of belonging is needed to understand the experiences of rural students and their mobility or immobility. This broader conceptualisation may indicate new research directions for urban research.

Keywords: emotional geographies, aspirations, rural areas, educational choices

Introduction

Geographically unequal distribution of opportunities for post-school education particularly affects young people in rural and regional areas of Australia (Halsey, 2018). Place and social mobility are therefore understood to be intertwined in the reproduction of inequality (Bauman,

2001; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Urry, 2007). An emerging focus on the concept of “*emotional topographies*” (Anderson & Smith, 2001, p. 8) and the related concept of “*geographic imaginaries*” (Donnelly et al., 2020, p. 91) has much to offer in deepening our understanding of young people’s educational mobilities. The impact of the 2020 global pandemic has tested expectations of educational mobilities and the sense of place, arguably requiring new thinking about the effects of dislocation and belonging on post-school transitions. Even while globalisation and digital technologies have transnationalised aspects of young people’s identity formation and social and economic participation, locality, geography and place remain important facets of young people’s emotional lives. Locality, geography and place impinge on the formation of aspirations (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, 2014) and “*imagined spatial futures*” (Rönnlund, 2020, p. 123).

In Australia, the physical geography and concentration of economic activities in coastal cities create differential geographic opportunities for young people as they make the transition from school to work and further education or training. Australia has a highly urbanised population, centred in a small number of large cities around the coastline, with the remainder of the country sparsely populated. This distribution means that the differences in circumstances between young people living in urban areas and those in rural areas can be extensive culturally, as well as geographically (Eversole, 2016). There is a consensus in the literature on rurality and aspirations that Australian rural communities, with their low population density, experience more substantial forms of geographic isolation than almost any other industrialised country (Regional Policy Advisory Committee, 2013). Australia is a big country with a small population.

However, as authors, we acknowledge that the terms used to describe rural and urban locations, including *urban*, *peri-urban*, *regional*, *rural* and *remote*, have specific meanings within Australian policy. Careless use of them may ignore variations in population size, resources, economic activity and access to services, and differ from other country-based literature (Department of Health, 2021). In Australia, areas outside the major cities are denoted as rural and remote. Since 1991, the Australian Standard Geographical Classification System has classified these areas as inner regional, outer regional, remote or very remote, despite recent population growth especially on the fringe of metropolitan areas (Department of Health, 2021; Department of Primary Industries, 1994). This paper focuses on urban fringe areas bordering on or merging into inner regional rural areas and outer regional rural areas. Although some places were more than a five-hour drive from a major city, these sites are not designated remote in Australian policy (Department of Health, 2021).

This paper draws on data from a National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) study which explored geographical and place dimensions of post-school transitions in peri-urban and rural areas of Australia among young people from low-socio economic status backgrounds, as well as the relative educational immobility of such young people (Webb et al., 2015). The study highlighted the finding that young people in rural areas held a positive and affectionate sense of belonging to the place where they grew up and that contributed to their future imaginaries. Re-analysing the project data for this paper shows that the idea of “*regional structures of feeling*” (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 961) provides a socio-spatial frame to understand students’ post-school educational choices and helps make sense of the immobility of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in rural areas. Concomitantly, it highlights the attraction to a rural life with appreciation of the natural world and pursuits in the outdoors, such as hiking, fishing, or going to the beach. Furthermore, demonstrating how regional structures of feeling impact students’ educational mobilities in rural areas, the research offers a deeper understanding of students’ transitions in urban areas.

Narratives of Mobility

Recent Australian education policy has sought to lift the aspirations of young people from low socio-economic status communities and continues to target students from rural, regional and remote areas (Bradley et al., 2008; Halsey, 2018). Significant inequalities remain in participation rates in vocational (Lamb et al., 2020) and higher education (Cardak et al., 2017). Geographic and social mobility are understood to be key factors in the continued reproduction of inequality amongst young people (Bauman, 2001; Urry, 2007). For some young people, this inequality is a function of immobilisation, of being “*tied to the ground*” (Bauman, 2001, p. 40) or “*locked into the local*” (Thomson, 2007, p. 81). Although immobility exists in some urban areas (Black, 2007), it is particularly notable in rural and regional areas (Halsey, 2018). Around a third of rural and regional students undertaking higher education have had to move, with a quarter of those movers going to another regional postcode (Cardak et al., 2017).

In seeking to understand student immobility in rural areas of Australia, this paper’s purpose is not to denigrate immobility. Instead, by understanding the socio-spatial interactional relations between people and places in different positions of advantage and disadvantage, it seeks to contribute to debates on social justice and educational choice in rural and urban areas. Arguably, the formation of policy and popular narratives about the nature of mobility and aspiration reinforce “*dominant spatial imaginations of places and the citizens that reside in them*” (Raco, 2009, p. 437).

Within policy and popular narratives, places with high proportions of people from low socio-economic status backgrounds, whether urban, peri-urban, regional, rural or remote, are frequently portrayed as places of deficit. These are places from which young people need to be “*rescued or redeemed*” (Black, 2012, p. 192), and aspiration and mobility will help them leave. From this perspective, young people’s immobility becomes a policy problem that needs to be resolved, and some educators construct their students’ choice to remain in their low socioeconomic communities as a bad choice that needs to be countermanded (Kenway & McLeod, 2004).

In a country where young people typically remain living at or close to home during their tertiary studies, there is little culture of moving to attend university (Edwards & van der Brugge, 2013). Distance from higher education providers creates a geographic, as well as a cultural barrier to participation in post-school education and training (Mills & Gale, 2008). Accessing opportunities, such as a university place at a research-led university or specialist vocational training provider, typically requires young people living in rural areas to travel for several hours to an urban centre (Alston & Kent, 2009). The added costs of travel and accommodation create barriers for young people from rural socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, compared with their urban peers (Cardak et al., 2017; Halsey, 2018; Hillman, 2005; Polesel, 2009). Moreover, when young people from rural areas move away from home to access tertiary education and training, they often experience significant pressures and difficulties in maintaining family responsibilities from a distance (Hillman, 2005).

A common theme in the literature on higher education participation is that the opportunities and the resources young people possess to navigate opportunities vary according to one’s social positioning (Croxford & Raffe, 2013; Reay et al., 2010). Each young person is located in their own socio-spatial context that needs to be explored in order to understand their educational choices (Bowl, 2003). Drawing on the Bourdieusian sense of habitus, parents emerge as a key influence upon young people’s choices and trajectories, particularly in rural communities (Byun et al., 2012). For those living in rural settings, the need to move to the unfamiliar habitus of urban settings of most Australian universities is regarded as particularly daunting (Turner, 2018).

Socio-economic status, geographical location, Indigenous/non-Indigenous background, parental influence and engagement with mainstream schooling are all interwoven factors creating each young person's socio-spatial location. Their interweaving serves to either open up, close off, or obscure possible post-school pathways. A young person's socio-spatial location also affects access to information about post-school pathways and confidence in seeking out such information (Bryce et al., 2007). In this context, notions of choice become problematic, as lack of opportunity can limit or preclude choice. Perceptions of opportunities as risky might also limit choices so that young people operate within their perceptual "horizons for action" (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). Young people's trajectories post-school may therefore be as much a consequence of the intersection of factors that locate them socially and spatially, rather than the result of conscious choice (Bowl, 2003).

Emotion, Place and Geographic Imaginaries

Apart from research identifying the role of habitus and demonstrating that choices are affected by socio-spatial positioning, there has been an emerging sociological interest in emotional geographies (Kenway & Youdell, 2011). The latter builds on scholarship which seeks to emphasise the socio-spatial nature of emotion (Davidson et al., 2005) and develop "a geographical agenda sensitive to the emotional dimensions of living in the world" (Anderson & Smith, 2001, p. 8). Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) argue that young people's higher education preferences in the UK are framed by their geographical imaginaries, claiming that a spatial understanding undermines simple class-based distinctions between advantaged "mobile" young people and the disadvantaged "immobile" (p. 977). More specifically, they draw on a concept from Raymond Williams (1961) to argue that there are "regional structures of feeling" that help to account for why some middle class students are as immobile as young people from working class backgrounds in places with strong industrial inheritances or small nation identities (p. 961). Such students prefer a university within the same city or region in which they have grown up, such as the north-east or north-west of England or Wales, rather than moving to a different type of area (Donnelly & Evans, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). In contrast, middle class students from London show strong preferences for universities with a long academic lineage in centres of finance and/or cultural activity with a cosmopolitan 'buzz', similar to London or Oxford and Cambridge, even if such study involves considerable mobility to another part of the UK or internationally (Donnelly et al., 2020, p. 101).

Much of this work on affective relations to place has been influenced by Massey's (1994) account of the identity of a place formed through different interrelating cultural, economic, social and political processes. More recently, post-human perspectives have provided a further dimension, the natural world, to this affective turn. Quinn's (2013) account of the importance of nature shows how educational immobility, in the mostly rural south-west of England, was counteracted by the opportunities that paid and unpaid activities in this environment gave marginalised young people for greater freedom to live a life in which they could develop expertise and satisfaction. Similarly, Rönnlund (2020) has shown the importance of the natural environment and identification with place in young people's imagined spatial futures in rural Sweden.

This emerging focus on "emotional topographies" (Anderson & Smith, 2001, p. 8) has much to offer in deepening our understanding of young people's educational mobilities, although interest in the more emotional aspects of mobility, including issues of dislocation and belonging, has not yet manifested in an ontological shift in scholarship (Waters, 2017). Anderson and Smith (2001) have called for a greater "geographic sensibility," which takes better account of the "subterranean" forces that influence and attend individuals' relationships to mobility and space (p. 9). But as Bartos (2013) argues, the emotional experience of place is not static: "both our sense of self and our sense of place are perpetually being felt, formed, dislodged, and (re)created" (p. 91). It is also contextual and relational (Bondi & Davidson, 2011).

In sum, the literature shows that locality, geography and place remain important facets of young people's emotional lives and important factors in the formation of their aspirations and educational transitions (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). Therefore, working with Cuervo and Wyn's (2014) suggestion that "*the metaphor of transitions as a heuristic device may need to be complemented with a metaphor of belonging*" (p. 2), this paper explores factors which nurture a generative and generous sense of belonging in young people from low socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas. More specifically, the concept of belonging is canvassed further by drawing on the concept of emotional topography. In broadening understanding of a sense of belonging, this paper explores how young people's regional structures of feeling and their attachment to nature and outdoor activities, alongside their attachment to people and their social networks, lead to a future "*intimately linked*" (Brown, 2011, p. 8) to their rural place (Quinn 2013; Rönnlund 2020).

Methodology

The research design encompassed four phases: desk data generation and analysis to uncover patterns of participation in education and training and identify the characteristics of the educational provision and local labour markets; narrative accounts from education stakeholders; and two phases of increasingly purposive narrowing of the sampling of young people in schools and post-school education and training, using focus groups and interviews to identify and explore different patterns and forms of participation.

The data informing this paper originate from a NCVET project which investigated geographic dimensions of participation. Building on quantitative research that analysed census data using postcodes and the longitudinal survey of young people (Longitudinal Surveys of Australia's Youth data, 2003 cohort), Johnston et al. (2014) established that some neighbourhoods with below-average socio-economic status have above-average student outcomes and vice versa. This suggested a need to further explore the neighbourhood dimensions that affect participation through qualitative case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Data analysed in this particular paper were collected from four postcode areas with limited post-school education opportunities, as typified by other studies of rural and regional Australia (Halsey, 2018). The four areas were selected for their intrinsic interest as case studies to investigate the effects of neighbourhood dimensions on participation. The criteria for inclusion were neighbourhoods based on high levels of low socio-economic status residents similar to each other, but with different post-school participation rates (Webb et al., 2015, p. 24). The four neighbourhoods in two states, Victoria and South Australia, encompassed both urban fringe and inner and outer regional rural areas, although the latter are not considered remote in Australian policy terms; the two areas where young people's educational participation was above the average for such areas were Southland (an inner regional rural area) and Eastshire (an outer regional rural area), and the two areas where young people's educational participation was below average were Northtown (an urban fringe area) and Westvale (an inner regional rural area). Pseudonyms have been used for these case study sites.

Interviews were conducted with 56 key informants, comprising educational providers (schools, colleges and local university campuses) and personnel from the local authorities, voluntary networks and other educational organisations (hereafter referred to as stakeholders in youth post-school-transitions). Purposive opportunity sampling was used to identify young people still engaged in schooling beyond Year 10 (the school-student group) and others who were participating in vocational education and training or higher education (the post-school group). Focus groups were conducted with young people (52) aged 16–25 years old in all four areas: 24 in the school-student group and 28 in the post-school group. Of note is that the purposive sampling identified 24 males and 28 females, all from families identified as low socio-economic status. Their cultural and ethnic background was predominantly white Australian, reflecting the composition of the four case sites. Only 12 of the young people self-identified with other ethnic or cultural

backgrounds, including seven with European and United Kingdom parental origins. The other ethnic backgrounds were: one Maori, one Filipina, one Mexican, one white South African, and one Indigenous background person.

Recordings of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Tarozzi, 2020). Grounded analysis that increasingly narrowed the specificity of particular relationships was used to identify different post-school trajectories and patterns of participation related to different family habitus, gender and local structures of opportunity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These different trajectories were explored further through selecting 16 individual young people (four from each case site) for second interviews. The analysis discusses the relationships identified between participants' geographic locations, their identifications with place, including their sense of belonging and their views about the natural environment, and their participation in post-school education and training.

The Four Case Sites

In order to contextualise the findings and appreciate the relevance of Massey's (1994) relational understanding of place and space to our analysis, this section describes the four case sites, drawing on the desk research about each site. A brief overview of the geography of Australia and the four research sites is provided here.

Despite its vastness, Australians are predominantly urban dwellers, assembled in one of seven coastal capital cities. Along with Canberra, the purpose-built federal inland capital, these capital cities are the political, cultural, educational and service centres of each state/territory. Around most of these cities, large peri-urban skirts have formed – sprawling suburbs of low-density blocks with single dwelling homes, out of which workers often commute into the city centre or find employment in manufacturing centres that developed on the urban fringe in the post-war industrial expansion. Further out are regional and rural areas, sometimes connected to the capital city by train or a major arterial route in a 'spoke and wheel' arrangement centred around the capital city. Beyond these regional areas are remote areas.

Although none of our case sites meet the Australian policy definition of remote, the term *remote* emerged at the site that is around 300 kilometres or 4–5 hours driving distance from the state capital city. The following exchange between educators living and working in a small township in Eastshire far from a capital city shows that *remote* is a relative term: "Well it is certainly very remote, we're very restricted from services" contrasts with "I don't think it's that remote, it's not remote compared to the rest of Australia".

Eastshire in Victoria is a predominantly rural and remote area, with a dispersed population working in the traditional industries of agriculture, forestry and fishing. As employment in these primary industries has become more precarious, public-sector work in health and education and in a growing tourist industry is becoming more important.

Southland in South Australia is a more diverse area with coastal housing developments and small inland settlements. The area has significant pockets of socio-economic deprivation which are a consequence of the decline of car manufacturing more than 15 years ago. Increasingly, economic activity relies on service industries (including artisan wine and food production and tourism).

Westvale in Victoria is more affluent than Southland and, whilst still rural, its western edges are a commutable distance to the urban fringe of the capital city. The main towns in the area are centres for agricultural production (dairy) and heavy industries (timber and paper), although since the state electricity provider and opencast coal mining are due to close or restructure, unemployment is increasing in the area. There are few professional level employment opportunities in Westvale, except at a regional campus of a university that continues to offer programs mainly in health and education to support the service needs of the area.

Northtown in South Australia is a purpose-built urban fringe suburb conceived in the 1950s to provide affordable housing for those recruited to work in post-war manufacturing developments in the newly created industrial zone. The major employer, a car manufacturer, has now closed, as have many associated manufacturers and large multiple shops in the purpose-built shopping precinct. With little employment, intergenerational poverty, few traditions of post-school study and the settlement of increasing numbers of new migrants who speak a first language other than English, the area has significant social deprivation.

Emotional Topographies and Geographic Imaginaries of Belonging

Massey's (1994) relational understanding of place and space informs the findings presented in this section. These findings highlight the different emotional identifications and internalised understandings held by the young people and the educational stakeholders who support post-school transitions in each of the four sites. The data show how people are bound to places through their relationships with other people. Through social interaction, narrative histories of these places have been constructed, revealing what Donnelly and Gamsu (2018), citing Raymond Williams, call "*regional structures of feeling*" (p. 961) that can affect people's geographic imaginaries and "*horizons for action*" for their futures (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). Through revealing these geographic imaginaries of belonging, this section of the paper indicates the processes that tie young people from low socio-economic status backgrounds to places where educational opportunities are limited, but where social connectedness is experienced as an enrichment of their lives.

Present in people's discourses about and within both Eastshire and Southland was a noticeable emotional topography setting up powerful delineations of difference and dividing themselves from the other case sites, Westvale and Northtown. As one vocational education provider states:

We don't have much activity in the Independent Republic of Eastshire. There's an emotional – not a barrier, an emotional sort of a border, I think, that we say is about R or S [towns] where we don't necessarily, don't deliberately advertise or promote ourselves past that way. (P, TAFE Institute, Eastshire)

The designation of "*the Independent Republic of Eastshire*" was more than an idiosyncrasy, as this Eastshire stakeholder indicates:

We know ourselves as the Independent Republic of Eastshire and we know that because, government doesn't care about us, because there's only 44,000 of us and we're 300 to 600 kilometres away from [capital city], who cares? (J, Education Learning Network, Eastshire)

In discussing the dislocating effect of the state Department of Education relocating their regional office from a rural town, not too far away, to an outer suburb of the capital city, this stakeholder invoked a geographic imaginary boundary limiting people's movement, stating: "*No-one would come from [interviewee names the outer urban suburb] to Eastshire for a meeting*" (J, Education Learning Network Eastshire). A counter story reveals local recognition of the need to develop their own ways of meeting the shortcomings of the state-provided educational opportunities.

Kate, a case study participant, explained that she started dance classes in the "*far-east*" of Eastshire to provide an opportunity to those "*who may not necessarily get a chance*" to attend some town centres because of travel times and distances. Educational services and opportunities in Eastshire appeared to be somewhat dependent on the emotional dispositions of those concerned and the borders they imagined.

In Southland, stakeholders, particularly those in what they termed the "*deep south*," similarly opined that, in relation to the state government investment in areas of social deprivation, "*we're very overlooked in the south*" (G, Local Government Economic Development Officer, Southland).

Jessica, who is currently undertaking a degree in social work, wistfully compared Southland to the city and urban fringe of Northtown to the north:

There's not as much, the economy down this way is just not as blooming as it is out north. I don't know if it's just like they spend more money out there, they've got more businesses. I don't know if it's more populated, but I think because the southern it's heaps more spread. (Jessica, post-school group, Southland)

Another stakeholder described Southlanders' strong sense of attachment and belonging to their towns, infrastructure, services and environments:

I think the culture ... is very much local, very strongly local. We are strongly connected into our local industries, the hospitals, the schools, the community environments and the networks and so on. (J, TAFE Institute, Southland)

For young people, identification with their local community was a strong magnetic and generative force influencing their geographic imaginaries of where and how to live their lives, as it was for this Southland young person who affirmed that Southlanders are "strongly local":

I'm happy where I am because I'm in the middle of everything. I've got my friends and I got my school [TAFE] and I got my work and it's only like a short distance everywhere. (Sasha, post-school group, Southland)

Jessica also explained that her interest in social work stems from wanting to contribute to her area and the people she identifies with and feels she belongs with:

I had a lot of interaction with a lot of different people and it did stem my curiosity. Like a little thinking about why these people are the way they are ... low socio-economic, the upbringing – like I'd think, "Is this a cycle?" ... Like for me it was interesting. The whole field – working with people, like the type of people you'd be working for, their history, their background and also just in general like the "I do come from the southern area" is seen as low socio-economic ... and I like living in the southern area. (Jessica, post-school group, Southland)

Community and health-related services were growing areas of employment in the four areas, with opportunities to undertake qualifications for this work in local colleges and programs linked to university regional campuses. Choosing to follow these post-school options often involved following a familial pathway and local narrative:

The majority of my family works in different parts of the community, like my brother works with kids with disabilities, my sister's becoming a nurse and she works in aged care. (Focus group stakeholder, Southland)

The strongly local natures of these small and distinctive places generated very strong local loyalties and community ties:

I think that people are very different here. I think we're more engaged at a community level and although there might be a lot of politics going on in the small villages and things like that, people do come together fairly well, especially like in emergency or, you know, like we're running a market or a festival or, you know, locally in the small towns. (R, Local Authority Transport Co-ordinator, Eastshire)

However, some young people, like Missy (post-school group, Eastshire), felt that the narrative of the importance of community ties could be cloistering what she called "small town syndrome." She said that if she did leave it would be to another rural area. Simone too was leaving Westvale to pursue higher education not locally available, but she was still emotionally tied to this rural-industrial area as a "great place to live," because of the "encouraging networks" that could be formed in small-town areas:

It's a close network and you find that wherever you are you're going to know somebody. You can go anywhere and you'll probably be like "I know you, don't I?" That sort of thing is encouraging, that's why I reckon a few people do stay here and don't move away, because they have a family here, they have their friends and they have that network of people that they know they can rely on or see or communicate with and it's a great thing about living in such a rural area. (Simone, school-student group, Westvale)

Living in places with smaller populations, the sense of belonging to a network – of being known, recognised, and an integral part of a community – seems to offer a strong foundation. Some such as Kate chose to provide opportunities to creatively enact their vision of enlarging opportunities for family, friends, neighbours, and people with fewer opportunities to meaningfully belong to a place. Kate, who is currently undertaking training to become an assessor of dance qualifications and eventually would like to become a primary school teacher, started classes in her local area because she remembers how important dance was in her own early school life. She observed:

After five or six years of teaching here in B (a dance school) I'd always get asked by family and friends and stuff like that that are in far east Eastshire, "Can you come and teach a workshop?" or "Can you come and do this at our school?" and I currently teach one day a week at N primary which also has a lot of kids from the Aboriginal village ... so I guess I wanted to reach out to that areas, so they have that at their reach and don't have to travel ... I just wanted to make that connection with the far Eastshire community. (Kate, post-school group Eastshire).

In contrast to the emotional identification with place and its communities in Eastshire, Southland and to some extent Westvale, young people in Northtown revealed that negative stereotypes often applied to its residents. These type-casts were a subject the young people in two Northtown focus groups raised, but peers quickly countered defence of the area's reputation. One group told of a Northtown estate "categorised as being like the feralist of feral." This strong statement elicited much laughter and was embellished by: "So feral; rabid-dog-feral." But a defensive argument quickly followed: "But just because the area's bad, doesn't mean the people are bad." In another focus group, a similar exchange occurred:

When going for like employment and whatever, and someone sees that you're from [Northtown], say you're getting a job in the city or somewhere, there could be a bias towards that you live in [Northtown], that you're more feral kind of. <laughs>

I don't really think, because we're the children obviously, we don't have a choice where we live, so it's how you get raised really, not where you live.

Stakeholders consistently referred to this "stigma of the north" being "a really big thing" that has "been a consistent barrier over the years" for young people seeking work experience, employment and other opportunities outside the area. This stigma has also affected the recruitment of teachers and other professionals, as noted by one of the headteachers, who turned it to his advantage in trying to redress the problem:

We had a reputation as the hardest school to staff ... but the upside of that was that because no permanent teachers would like to come here ... we encouraged a lot of student teachers to come from the universities ... we spot talent or quality ... then encourage them to pick up a contract and apply for permanency. Some of the most successful people we've had are people who live local and are happy to be here. (D, school principal, Northtown)

Westvale was also noted as a place that outsiders stigmatised, with strong comments from stakeholders such as "nobody likes" a particular run-down "ghost town" or that, "I mean, it's got the dirtiest coalmine every five minutes as you drive past." Indeed, this image of an unpleasant place was proposed by an Eastshire stakeholder as a reason Eastshire young people avoided selecting the university campus in Westvale:

So, no offence, there are beautiful places near [university campus], but the Valley, to get to it, not seen as attractive, not seen as – [pause] – even though it's on the corridor, seen as quite different. (C, TAFE Institute, Eastshire)

Nevertheless, one of the Westvale case study students in her last year of school, who viscerally linked stigmatic perceptions of Westvale and the natural topography, also quickly came to defend her hometown for its valued emotional topography:

A lot of the people see [her home town] or even Westvale at the moment as a hole and literally if you look at the landscape it's like right at the bottom and there's mountains around us, but it's a great place to live. (Simone, school-student group, Westvale)

Noticeably, these narratives of place construct its history and indicate future possibilities for living there (Massey 2005). They recognise and value the industrial past of places such as Northtown and Westvale, by identifying the close ties people form in supporting each other, even though outsiders might stigmatise such areas. And, in Southland and Eastshire, coping strategies are shared for dealing successfully with their isolation and the feelings of being cut-off from the urban centres where policies and funding distributions are decided. In several instances, these accounts echoed the geographic imaginaries of the young people Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) studied in the industrial north of England and culturally distinct countries such as Wales or Scotland.

Interestingly though, whilst these accounts from young people from low socio-economic status backgrounds emphasised the importance of place and attachment in educational immobility, there were some indications that “*regional structures of feeling*” cut across social class as in the UK (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 961). Although we did not focus on accounts of young people from higher socio-economic status backgrounds, interviews with educational stakeholders who were employed in professional roles in Eastshire and Southland (though not Northtown or Westvale) highlighted their own connectedness and belonging, and that of their children, to these rural places recognised for their natural beauty. These professionals mentioned that, routinely, the children of the professional classes were likely to complete their schooling in urban areas, often at boarding schools, in order to prepare for university education.

Yet, despite the greater educational mobility of young people from higher socio-economic status backgrounds, stakeholders from Eastshire and Southland reported that many of these higher educated young people would be drawn back to the regional and rural areas if professional employment opportunities became available at a later stage in their lives. It is noteworthy that the professionals, who envisaged their children returning later in life to take up professional employment, lived and worked in the areas considered naturally scenic, rather than industrial. To consider this broader sense of belonging, the following section explores people's perceptions of rural belonging and the natural world.

Strongly Local Natures: Rural Belonging and the Natural World

Attachment to the natural world was also a distinctive aspect of young people's sense of belonging to the rural areas of Eastshire and Southland. The emotional topography generating people's structures of feeling for the culture and history of a place, not only included their sense of belonging to a community and particular social networks, but also attachment to the physical and material place. Southland and Eastshire are the two rural areas with coastlines, inland forests and farms and very little industrial development, although Southland has had a manufacturing and oil refining industrial past.

In contrast, the areas of Westvale and Northtown both have evidence of heavy industrial production or extraction industries (such as car manufacture, power plants, coal mining, paper making and so on) with visible effects on the landscape. In highlighting their rural belonging to

the natural world as well as to the community relationships, these findings echo the work of Quinn (2013) and Rönnlund (2020). For example, in describing how a college in Eastshire advises a regional higher education provider how to operate in this rural area, a stakeholder said:

We say to them [the higher education provider] “You need to think about delivery models that enable a young person to stay in their town of origin.” Because if they’re not going to M [the capital city], they don’t see it [that is, any reason to choose the regional provider] – they’d probably rather stay here which is the S, B, O, whatever town they live in, or within shot of it, than go ... to the Valley [i.e., Westvale]. ... no way people here [would choose the Valley because] one of the things is [people’s] love of beautiful landscape. (C, TAFE Institute, Eastshire)

For some young people, rurality was a bloodline, like Ted the dairy farmer and stud cattle breeder (while still at school), whose mother was “five or six maybe” generations local and whose passion was infectious: “I just love it [farming], going outside and what – drafting, chasing, whatever, anything on a farm, or anything to do with cattle farming” (Ted, school-student group, Eastshire). Greg, a young man with an outdoor job in Eastshire, could not conceive of what city folk would possibly do with their time, because where he lived:

you’re not really that far from anything when you think about it. There’s the beach, rivers, you can do – depends on what your hobbies are really. Shooting, fishing, 4WD driving, camping, there’s pretty much whatever you want. If you were in the city, you wouldn’t really be doing that much. Like you could be but you’d have to travel a fair bit. (Greg, post-school group, Eastshire)

For Greg, leaving the area for education would have meant losing all that he valued; his geographic imaginary future would have been impoverished in a city without access to the rural outdoors and opportunities this provided. For Morgan (post-school group, Eastshire), a temporary educational shift was possibly desirable, but only to another rural location and not as a way to circumvent rural barriers and limitations: “more for experience to bring back more than anything.” Likewise, Jessica (post-school group, Southland) said that she liked “living in the southern area so even if I did move, it wouldn’t have been too far from home anyway.” For these young people, their rural home and the activities and social connections it afforded were central to their understanding of who they were and how they wished to live.

For many, like Greg and Ted, the “great outdoors,” nature and the natural beauty of their place was a significant part of their world. Jo, also from Eastshire, who was very attached to her horse living in a nearby paddock, described where she lived as having “the beach one end and the bush the other.” Ashlee (school-student group, Eastshire) lived with her family on a hobby farm with “cows and dogs and a cat.” Kate (post-school group, Eastshire), who currently lives in the town that is the civic centre of Eastshire, aspires to live in a coastal seaside town, because “I just think the coastal area is beautiful,” and “like you’ve got everything there. Yeah, it’s just a really great spot.”

One of Kate’s “loves in life” is “going for walks,” which Missy, her friend, also enjoys: “I’m a big hiker so hiking is always fun. ... I just go by myself. I’ve been lost about twice and wondered why I keep doing it but no it’s just relaxing I find”. (Missy, post-school group, Eastshire)

With a similar storyline, Lauren, also from Eastshire, envisaged her future life in her attractive and spacious rural locality, after some travel which would contribute to her journalistic experience and work aspirations:

Well, in dream life I’m going to still be here. I will have built a house and it will be beautiful and I’ll live in the bush and I won’t have to talk to people every day <laughter>. I hope I’ve done a lot more travelling, I hope I’m able to work independently for myself. (Lauren, post-school group, Eastshire)

Morgan, is also attached to his “great outdoors”:

I think we've got some fantastic natural resources locally like it's really good to go up to the hills and have a bit of a walk around or go to the rainforest or go the beach, so we're really lucky in that sense. (Morgan, post-school group, Eastshire)

Similarly, stakeholders in Eastshire echoed these views, saying of Eastshire: “It is an amazingly beautiful natural environment” (S, Local Authority Transport Co-ordinator, Eastshire) and “yeah, access to the lake and, you know, the access to the snow. It's something pretty special I think we have here” (B, Local Authority Planning Officer, Eastshire). Moreover, when describing how many people relocate to the area after gaining qualifications and work experience, as professionals elsewhere, or opt to obtain a trade qualification locally in order to support a lifestyle of “fly in-fly out” work, this stakeholder stated that “quite a few want to raise their family in this fantastic rural environment which has got every natural attraction you can think of” (J, Education Learning Network, Eastshire).

In Southland there were again references to nature and the outdoors. One young man who had moved from the UK said: “It's a nice place. There's a beach. ... It's a nice area” (Henry, post-school group student, Southland). And one school student was very enthusiastic about her outdoor education subjects:

and the outdoor recreation one I did because with the archaeology you go outside and all that stuff and I just wanted to know how to use a compass and all that properly. ... My outdoor rec class I did kayaking earlier in the year and I did skiing and I just came back from a surfing/boogie board camp. (Emily, school group, Southland)

But the number of references to the importance of the natural environment were far less compared to Eastshire. Stakeholders in Southland did invoke Quinn's (2013) finding that having a fulfilling life that embraces the natural world may be more important than being educationally mobile to pursue higher qualifications and employment:

It's a pretty interesting location. You've got your beaches, you're half an hour away from the city, you're half an hour away from [this place] if you want to escape, you've got the wineries and you've got everything within half an hour that you want to have. Like out north you've got employment, but you've got no beaches and you don't have anything else so that's a lot more isolating. (T, Youth Services, Southland)

They [business people] grew up here and they want their kids to grow up here, they like the lifestyle, they like to be able to shut the door and go surfing at three o'clock in the afternoon. So it's very hard when you're doing an investment attraction plan because they're not actually making decisions to expand their factory on any business case; it's purely because they grew up here and they don't want [to leave], oh couldn't possibly have a factory in the north [Northtown]. (G, Local Authority Economic Development Officer, Southland)

The presence of tourists and visitors supports this view that Eastshire and Southland are desirable places to visit and live, unlike Westvale or Northtown, which many see as places to drive through as quickly as possible, either into the capital city and all its attractions, or to the beaches, wineries and snowfields. In Westvale, there were far fewer references to nature or the outdoors and any references to the natural world were highly bounded:

Probably opportunities is you've got a good base to grow up and develop. You've got your big backyards, you've got you're able to just to walk across to a friend's house or go on a bike ride up the bush and stuff like that, whereas you're limited in the city. You might not even have a yard at all and your yard would be a park. (Drew, post-school group, Westvale)

In Northtown, there was scant mention of anything natural or the outdoors and, when it was mentioned, it was presented as an urbanised, bounded outdoors. Participants valued the proximity of the places rather than any outdoor experience, saying that to get to the shops you “just walk through the park” (Kirby, school-student group, Northtown) and, “I just walk to school, but I have like two small choices that I could make which is go the long way or the short way”. (Rowan, school-student group, Northtown)

Although several students, particularly the boys in Northtown, mentioned playing outdoor sports, such as soccer, their attachment seemed to be to the networks of people associated with the activity, rather than the pursuit in nature. This absence of mention of natural features or connections with nature in the urban fringe site of Northtown suggests a landscape that young people viewed without emotional attachment. Nevertheless, Northtown was still a place where young people felt they belonged to a community. Indeed, those who were considering higher education as a post-school option invoked feelings of attachment to Northtown by selecting courses at the campus of the technical university, rather than the research-focused university, since the former was physically closer to Northtown, easily reached on a trainline and not in the city.

Making Sense of Immobility

Popular culture and education policy promotes mobility, but our study identified a range of geographic and emotional factors that moored people to the local place. Moreover, the emotional topographies generating regional structures of feeling to remain in the local place were additional to other well-documented social and material difficulties affecting the post-school options of those from low socio-economic status backgrounds in these rural and urban fringe areas (Halsey, 2018; Webb et al., 2015). The opportunity considerations people experience in these rural and urban fringe areas have merely been alluded to in this paper, including distance from centres of learning, lack of public transport, lack of broadband internet access, costs of public and private travel, the time constraints distance imposes, limited education providers and programs, and the unintended consequences of funding policies for education and training that impact particularly harshly on those most in need. This is because, importantly, this paper has shown that, of equal relevance to understanding immobility are the perceptions of place developed through interactions within families, social networks and other encounters.

For many of our participants, the local place was “*not all bad.*” Immobility reflected a situated rational choice (Hatcher, 1998). Two of the places, Southland and Eastshire, both with beaches, farmland, forests and artisan food producers and wineries, were regarded as offering a good lifestyle. Not surprisingly, there were several examples of professionals who had chosen to relocate to these areas. In contrast in the other two areas, Westvale and Northtown, many professionals chose to commute to the area for employment, rather than live there.

For many, living in places they described as beautiful and finding ways to live that encompassed their natural world were crucial to their geographic imaginaries. Just as Quinn (2013) found that marginalised youth in areas of outstanding natural beauty in England chose futures in local casual employment, which enabled them to continue to engage with the natural world rather than education or training, several of our participants in Eastshire and Southland considered the place of the natural world when making decisions about their post-school futures. Nevertheless, young people from the two less picturesque areas, Westvale and Northtown, still claimed an emotional attachment to their place and its communities, although they acknowledged that they may have to move away to pursue further study or employment. In this regard, their sense of belonging and imagined future were still tied to their narrative of the place where they lived (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Donnelly et al., 2020; Massey 2005).

The two main factors that informed the relational understanding of place identified here have been the value of community in ameliorating the isolation of distance and in compensating for poor pay, and having a “*job not a career*,” as well as the importance of the natural beauty of a place. These findings resonate with those of Hillman (2005), who found a strong pull to return ‘home’ among university students once they graduated. Indeed, a number of stakeholders pointed to the practice of many university-educated families leaving the area (particularly areas with outstanding scenery, such as Southland and Eastshire) to support the continuing education of their families in metropolitan areas and then being drawn back by the emotional topographies of the place.

Conclusion

Young people and stakeholders in all four case sites aligned emotional borders, topographical features and official borders to construct their “*strongly local*” delineations. Such specific and “*clear storylines*” and “*steeped traditions*,” or what Mills and Gale (2008) call “*inheritances*,” were a very distinctive feature in people’s accounts of these localities. These mapped futures persist despite drastically changing conditions, demonstrating the strongly relational way that narratives of place form “*where the successions of meetings, the accumulation of weavings and encounters build up a history*” (Massey, 2005, p. 139).

Resonating with the work of Donnelly and colleagues (Donnelly & Evans, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Donnelly et al., 2020), each place was invoked through narratives that influenced people’s understandings of their areas, giving rise to distinct “*regional structures of feeling*” (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 961) and different geographic imaginaries for their futures. These imaginaries were invoked in accounts of whether to move or not for further educational participation, irrespective of whether the place being talked about is objectively picturesque or shows the scars of post-industrial decay. This finding supports the work of Donnelly and colleagues in the UK, who argue that an analysis of the “*regional structures of feeling*” (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 961) has wider relevance to studies of educational participation in urban as well as rural settings.

The concept of “*regional structures of feeling*” (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 961) can indicate how young people perceive geographic and social mobility, and their different capacities for each of these, and their different capacities for the development of future aspirations and imagined lives. The strong affective relations or “*emotional topographies*” (Anderson & Smith, 2001, p. 8) identified in this paper define imagined geographic boundaries each with “*strongly local*” cultures and mindsets which influence people’s horizons for mobility.

The forces constructing specific geographic imaginaries of localities are not necessarily visible to distant decision-makers, but are powerful in contributing to the ‘what you can and can’t do’ situations within which young people form educational, career and life aspirations. By drawing on the pragmatic localised rationalities and affective identifications with place and being, the choices young people make about where to live, learn and work cannot be reduced to simple or deficit explanations of rurality and socio-economic disadvantage. This paper has offered urban research, and indeed all education research more broadly, a way of moving beyond deficit discourses to understand more nuanced understandings of socio-economic disadvantage and educational immobility. By broadening the concept of a sense of belonging to encompass a geographic and emotional sensibility to the narrative histories of places and the natural world, this paper has been able to elicit how young people’s identification with place interacts with material conditions and social relationships. In highlighting the importance of “*regional structures of feeling*” (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 961) to understand how young people in rural and peri-urban areas frame their post-school choices and imagine their futures, this educational research in rural areas has provided a dimension that has wider applicability for research on educational participation in urban areas.

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