"Finding What Doesn't Fit": Adjusting the Focus on Education in Country Towns as a Limiting Case for the "Learning or Earning" Years

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Abstract

Limiting, or nonconforming cases are good tests in research for extending a concept's reach and broadening generalisations, but the method is under utilised in the formation and assessment of educational policy. In this paper a rural town is described as a case, among others, not fitting policy regulations for "learning or earning" in Years 11 and 12 in Queensland. It is argued, through a description of the production and reproduction of the town's service economy, that neither the curriculum nor the workforce can be placed within a theory of social and economic networking underpinning policies on retention and pathways upon which the Queensland legislation rests. Cases such as these are difficult to uncover because factors that best describe their true economic and social conditions tend to be compressed within statistical reporting models for educational regions. While the focus is on a rural town, the purpose is to advance policy design and implementation that seeks to sustain educational change in diverse conditions.

Introduction

A phrase from sociologist Howard Becker (1998, p. 83), "finding what doesn't fit", leads the title of this paper. It can help show how some groups, usually left out, could be brought back into the scope of a social policy (e.g., country schools into more positive dimensions of learning or earning). Becker is, of course, referring to the use of disconfirming factors in research to "identify the case most likely to upset your thinking" (Becker, p. 83) and to draw on such cases to illuminate what is and is not within a given category. The intention is to describe the economy and workforce as one limiting case (among others in urban and rural areas) for the analysis of an

educational regulation – the Queensland government's "Youth Participation in Education and Training Act", 2003 (implemented in 2006). Now referred to by politicians and in common parlance as the learning and earning act, it is for simplicity referred to in this paper as the Queensland Act. The aim in this paper is to show unevenness of impact at a rural periphery outside of that proposed centrally. It is argued that the Act is incompatible with the local economy and its workforce and lacks relevance of fit between curriculum, employer expectations and the aspirations of families and children. The paper comprises four sections, dealing in turn with method, the community's geographical setting, the production and reproduction of its economy and workforce, which includes a comparison of work possibilities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents. The paper concludes with a set of principles for preparing policy in relation to the non-conforming case.

Method

This section briefly describes the research and how it was framed. The research began in 2000 with a mainly self-funded survey of thirty-one high schools ranging from Brisbane to Westedge, one of the last places to offer Years 11 and 12 of high school in southwest Queensland. A second project, (2001-2003) about school to work pathways in Westedge was government-funded. The focus was on concepts and methods (an epistemology) to understand schools in their geographic and economic settings. The aim was to explore on a small scale how cultural capital (family resources) was spread and used for study and work within a defined geographical space, as described by Bourdieu (1984/1984). What does it mean, for example, to be close to or far from certain economic and educational possibilities? In which conditions could education be a means for fulfilling a possibility?

The purpose was to investigate school-to-work pathways and transitions in Westedge. Employers, residents, students and staff in schools were interviewed, as well as some local property owners and workers. Relevant statistical information was not available due to floods that follow drought in the area. National census statistics up to 2001 and information from the Queensland government statistician gave a broad view of the workforce in the shire and occupations in the town. Estimates of the workforce in Westedge were made by subtracting populations from other towns from the shire's total population. To check these, a statistical picture was made from analysis of a brief two-page survey of local employers (local and government). Questions concerned employees by number, age and sex, if employees (full-time, part-time or casual) were local or from out of town, the most preferable characteristics of good workers, and relevance of school and further education in selecting a new worker. The survey had an over 80% return rate; with assistance from three long-term residents. The comparisons of our survey numbers were surprisingly close to those in the 2001

Census, but with the added advantage of having clearer categories of work in Westedge than those in the broader census classifications. Some comparisons of employment and non-employment of Indigenous (101) and non-Indigenous (398) parents were made from information where children from the state primary and secondary school answered questions about their parent's work in a brief class exercise, assisted by teachers in the lower grades. It was now possible to compare work opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous families, which are included as a brief section of this paper to demonstrate how the earning dimension of the Queensland Act impacts differentially on Indigenous residents. Ethnography was central to the research. Time in the town provided an opportunity to combine questionnaires with unobtrusive observation, to fill in gaps in statistics and to spend time in places of employment, in primary and high schools and to experience some aspects of country life.

Geographical location: Centre-to-periphery policy design and the learning and earning regulations

Government policy has been said to take for granted the existence of a "strong core, weak periphery", which is part of a "rarely articulated mental map of Australia" that has influenced Australian governments for decades (Sher & Sher 1994, pp. 5-8). Situated between 800 and 1000 kilometres nearly due west of the capital Brisbane, Westedge is in the state's southwest region. Its location invites a view of policy designed along centre-to-periphery lines. This is illustrated in Figure 1, a map of Queensland's statistical divisions. The area considered moves west from Brisbane and Moreton to the Darling Downs to the southwest. Population to geographic area ratios are interesting. Brisbane and the southeast section have two-thirds of state population within 1.3 percent of state land area. The darling Downs (200,000 residents) is 5.7 of population and 5.2 for land area. Land area (18.4 percent of the state) to population (0.7 percent) ratio reverses in southwest Queensland (25,000 residents).

The economic base of the southeast and Darling Downs support large industry, specialised divisions of labour, agriculture and a variety of exports; these are conditions where occupations will align with education. The drier and drought-prone southwest is more reliant on grazing, the further west the land has been settled, and where a division of labour uncouples from schooling. If, then, as Teese (1998) suggests, the curriculum is a translation of social and economic structure, schools will assume a "broader role in the transmission of social status" (Teese, p. 406) . . . and academic attainment itself is considered "critical" and "decisive". Westedge (800 to 1000 kilometres from Brisbane and 10.3, or very remote, in the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia [ARIA]) is a place in the southwest where education is *not* central to attaining social status. Generalised claims about poor rural education outcomes have been made since Percival Cole's (1937) book, "The Rural School in Australia". Conditions are now such that some

rural schools transmit status and others do not and this points to the Queensland Act. The regulations situate families as individual consumers (parents and Year 10 students), facing choices about options among "providers": a high school, TAFE, an employer for 25 hours paid work per week or a private provider for courses and apprenticeships and traineeships. The policy focus on "re-engagement activities" for those "at risk of disengaging from education and training" (and a challenge to "recognise and address structural barriers faced by young people"). This will be discussed with reference to concepts of pathways and social networks underpinning the Act.

Figure 1: Queensland's Statistical Division ABS 2006

Literature

Literature on pathways, and terms related to it, influenced the analysis of Westedge and selection of the learning and earning regulation as a limit to the relevance of policy in that town. That pathways were to be found was written large in the terms of reference. Used initially in the Finn Report (1991), pathways was re-introduced in the federal government's "Footprints to the Future" document (Eldridge, 2001), to

network students into schools and vocational education and training. The term as addressed in reports, (Raffe, 2001) spread without too much trouble (now as a concept) into a general and specialised literature within university faculties. A hybrid literature formed around pathways with criminology and education, health and other government services, based around early intervention and full service delivery on the one hand and new forms of government, to raise social capital and sustain economic development in regions on the other (Edgar, 2001). In either case the intention is for social networking to increase economic participation and productivity, and a formation of social capital. Networking theory and social capital originate in economic sociology. The basic premise in either case is that pathways develop when a bridge is established between ties in a social network. Networks can be classified by their strength in close knit interactions such as being a member of a family, church or sporting group, which establishes connections, or a social or collective glue. Coleman (1988) proposes networks are based in the generation of a form of social capital, which is a basis for individual choice. Alternatively, social capital in individual and collective networks is said to constitute strong ties, or bridges as claimed by Putnam (2000). But a well-known earlier claim, about "The Strength of Weak Ties" by Granovetter (1973), is now accepted in economics and sociology as a means to understand indirect influences on a network as a social and individual referral system. Networking of these types is at the base of pathways literature, of which the Queensland Act is a part.

Building ties, bridges and networks and pathways concepts has, since the late 1990s, been a basis for large scale, government funded, Australian policy interventions. Some have merged policing with education and services to form "precincts", regional "clusters" (Victorian Department of Justice, 1997). Merging aspects of criminology with education, Homel (1999) called for demonstration projects of early intervention at periods of most risk in a life cycle. Based on reductions in crime rates for students in intervention programs such as "Operation Head Start" in the U.S.A., Homel's "Pathways to Prevention" project seeks to intervene by sustaining protective life factors as buffers against known risk factors. Closer to regional interventions is the Dusseldorp Foundation's Whittlesea Youth Commitment Partnership. In Whittlesea, an expanding semi-rural Melbourne suburb, the Dusseldorp Foundation aimed to increase community involvement, "social connectedness" and improve school to work transitions for disadvantaged youth. The program was specifically set up for youth not in work or full-time school and customised a curriculum across schools, TAFE, other training providers and employers specific to individual youths (Spierings, 2000). Rural pathways, can, it seems, be embedded in the economy within a rural area or town. Edgar's (2001) "Patchwork Nation" highlights long-term community and school partnerships established in rural areas, but adds that they remain as problematic when forms of social capital are not sustained. This is now addressed.

While lighthouse and demonstration projects can advance a policy's reach, it is not clear as to their carry over to diverse conditions. The Whittlesea and Pathways to Prevention projects attempt to model answers to pressing social issues, but can broad models prevent the uncovering of invariant cases? Teese (cited in Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., & Rumberger, R., 2004) for example, reflecting on statistical modelling of national school retention says models show no great gap "when account is taken of population differences, remoteness, interstate migration, and modalities of school use… (but) removing the impact of these population factors greatly compresses interstate differences" (Teese, cited in Lamb et al., p. 150). In other words, while certain known factors mitigate against retention, their removal gives an impression of meeting retention targets. An example is found in a Queensland Government (2007) report "Next Step", with which Teese and others from Melbourne University are involved through surveys of the Queensland high school system. "Next Step" surveys follow the destinations of students who completed Year 12 at Government schools, Catholic schools, independent schools and TAFE secondary colleges. One point from the report supports an argument for Westedge being a limiting case. This is the creation of an educational category joining Darling Downs/South West Queensland, which joins two diverse economic and geographic regions. As argued through Figure 1, a factor such as remoteness will be compressed when a region with 0.7% of state population is combined with one with 5.7 percent. Neither modalities of school or distance can surface, nor will variations in economic reliance on education for occupational status between the two regions. The "Next Step" report states, "Year 12 completers in Darling Downs/South West had similar post-schooling destinations to other non-metropolitan Year 12 completers" (Queensland Government, p. 5). But, is this due to similarities Darling Downs schools share with others? This can be done through a separation of the regions, which is one aspect of survey data to be presented. We can claim Westedge as a limiting case due to remoteness and a tendency for other factors being compressed in generalisations across two state regions. This claim relies on statistics on the town's economic conditions and the relations with work and education, which is the task that follows.

Production and reproduction of a rural service economy

Westedge is not "rural" in the usual sense of reliance on agriculture and farming, nor is it a "one industry" western mining town. Westedge is a service town. The region's main industry of grazing and wool is neither geographically close enough nor sufficiently labour intensive to impact directly on the workforce. In the main, the town provides services, government and privately-owned, required for the livelihood, health, education and recreation of the townspeople. The patterns of employment within the town are governed by this service relationship. The rural situation and current economic conditions in Westedge work against and make it difficult to locate new employment and business opportunities. Baum, O'Connor and Stimson (2005)

have listed Westedge, and other Australian regions and towns, in the unflattering category of "population stagnant/employment disadvantaged" and producing "poor labour-market outcomes". These are places where wages are "slightly below the average" and they have "more low-income households than high-income households". Economic downturns in the 1990s brought business closure and residents seeking opportunities elsewhere.

For over a century until the 1960s, Westedge was a centre for labour intensive employment in grazing of cattle and sheep. Property work has since diminished with more labour saving machinery on properties and the men moving into the town for secure work in places such as the shire council, the railways or the hospital. Few of these jobs are those where specialisation (and a career) is tied to an industry sector or is reliant on educational credentials. A survey of local employers showed that, from a population of around 3500 people, there were 1409 employed persons (761 males and 648 females). There were 119 non resident public servants. Of residents, males (67.8 percent) are more likely than females (58.3 percent) to work full-time. Part-time employment rates are similar, but more women than men are in casual employment. Wages are drawn from five work sectors plus the CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects), an Indigenous casual work for the dole scheme. The sectors, as shown in Table 1, have minimal affiliation with a traditional curriculum, with trades and professions making up less than 10 percent of the workforce. The largest rural employer, the abattoir, seeks seasonal, part-time and casual workers for "on call" manual labour. Other rural services are town based; those related to primary industries, valuers produce distributors and wholesalers. Eighty-four men were registered as kangaroo shooters. Eighty-five percent of jobs for men were in rural (36 percent), retail (25 percent) and public services (24 percent). The public service opportunities for men are more often in the local council (in trades, road work and repair) and to a lesser degree in the state government.

Work sector	% workforce	Employers	Males employed	Females employed
Professional	6	11	27	60
Trades	8	15	89	21
Rural	24	19	271	64
Retail	31	74	193	241
Public service	31	8	181	262
Totals	**100**	**127**	**761**	**648**
Breakdown of public service and addition of CDEP				
Resident	73% of Public service		131	193
Non-resident	27% of Public service		50	69
CDEP	175 to 190 casual Indigenous employees – 5.5 percent of population			

Table 1: Workforce n = 1409 plus CDEP – Westedge

Nearly 80 percent of women were employed either in the public services sector or retail, 40 percent in areas such as health and education and 38 percent in retail. The public service is the key player in this economy, as much for the number of jobs as for its secure conditions of employment. Three in ten workers receive public service wages on conditions set outside of the Westedge economy. Taking the public service out of the employer to employee equation, there are 1000 employees spread across 120 employers. Around six in ten places of employment are in retail, each having an average of six employees. Around 40 percent of jobs (rural and retail) are semi-skilled, which indicates small step career paths and little significance for educational credentials for advancement. There is at present little place here for a curriculum that embeds secondary school subjects in occupations and educational institutions. Tertiary trained public servants (teachers, nurses, clerical workers and managers) account for 27 percent of total positions in this sector (119 of 443). In a real sense these are positions filled from, and produced and reproduced from, a distance. While the jobs may be situated in the town, the entry rules and the transfer and promotion pathways into and out of them are established centrally, far from the periphery where incumbents do their "country service" of one to four years.

Of five workforce sectors available in Westedge, work for men is likely to be outdoors and physical in rural and public service jobs. Women are more frequently seen in the state public services and retail sectors. The most populated sectors of this service economy do not have the occupations for jobs requiring tertiary training, at least not for local residents. What then is the basis on which these towns reproduce their labour markets?

Reproduction of the workforce

Distance is an obvious factor militating against central policy taking root in southwest Queensland. Distance can be measured spatially, but takes its real meaning in the time it takes to travel (e.g., to a better job, to TAFE and university). The southwest (and Westedge) cannot be fully analysed without comparisons with the southeast. Distance between producer and consumer, worker and employer, student and educational institution and a predominance of semi-skilled work determine how the workforce is produced and reproduced. It overrides formal education and training as the means of transitions from school to work. Options of commuting between suburbs and towns, common in the southeast, and more likely in the regions around the Darling Downs, are not feasible in the southwest. Time and means to commute further restrict chances to access further study and gain better value for grades achieved at high school. They affect the viability of a town that has to retain or boost the resident population and attract transient workers and tourists to reproduce its economy.

There is little means to add positions to the workforce, as is indicated by the numbers on the CDEP. Pathways for young people are in jobs with age-related wage rates; in retail, or where employers receive government incentives for trainees and apprentices. The case for retail is shown in Table 2. Young employees make up around 25 percent of total employees, or 104 of 434 employees in the sector. Retail is the major pathway for nearly half of this age group. The pull towards retail is doubly strong for young women where there is an 80 percent chance (55 of 65) of a female working in retail. With older workers holding on to jobs, direct entry to professional and public service work is scarce for young entrants.

Young males have two main paths outside of retail, namely trades and rural jobs. The ratio of young men in trades and traineeships (35 of 113) could be a result of government subsidies. Apprenticeships are highly valued, as they are portable; they can be used in the town and elsewhere. In contrast, the rural jobs in Table 1 are "just a job" filled by 16 casual employees, young men who have left school early to work at the abattoir. It is interesting then to enquire as to where school fits into these patterns of employment.

When employers were surveyed they were asked the importance of Year 10, Year 12 and TAFE, and what they looked for in a new employee. Their replies showed Year 10 as the main currency, either "important" or "very important". Over two thirds indicated that Year 12 completion was "not important". Two thirds of all employers said TAFE training was not important in 65 to 85 percent of cases in trades and retail. Employers preferred candidates with specific personal qualities: those who communicate, present well, were reliable and willing to work, had common sense and good customer relations. Professional positions were said to be hard to fill: "You don't get qualified accountants living out here". Training could also create its own problems: "No-one that is good in IT wants to be in a small town when the big money is elsewhere. We train our trainees in many areas of IT. The problem is that after we train them, they move to Brisbane or somewhere else", where there are better prospects outside of this economy for those possessing higher skills and education. To conclude, education has a contradictory place in the economy and cannot be directly compared in curriculum value with more urbanised areas.

Employment Sector	Males				Females				Percentage workforce 15-20 years
	Full-time	Part-time	Casual	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Casual	Total	
Public Service	5	0	0	5	3	1	0	4	5
Professional	0	0	1	1	2	0	1	3	2
Rural	5	2	16	23	2	0	0	2	14
Retail	29	6	14	49	15	17	20	55	57
Trades	30	4	1	35	4	0	0	4	22
Total in work	**69**	**12**	**32**	**113**	**26**	**18**	**21**	**65**	**178***

Table 2: 15-20 Year Olds at Work: Employment Sector and Gender – Westedge
**An extra three boys and two girls aged 15 to 17 were registered with the CDEP*

Parents' Occupation	Percentage Non-Indigenous (n=398)	Percentage Indigenous (n=101)
Both work	54	20
One works	33	17
Carer works, no father	5	10
Neither works	3	22
Carer home, no father	5	31

Table 3: Non-Indigenous and Indigenous Work Patterns: Individual Children at Primary and High School – Westedge

School	Year 9	Years 10/11	Year 12	University	No Course / No institution	Course / No institution	University / TAFE
Westedge	56	24	12	9	39	15	46
Southwest 1	59	26	7	8	43	13	44
Darling Downs 1	7	74	9	9	27	10	62
Darling Downs 2	13	41	22	23	19	8	73
Toowoomba	9	25	24	43	16	14	70
Brisbane (metro)	3	16	20	61	14	5	81
Brisbane (outer)	18	38	28	17	29	13	58

Table 4: Children's Fathers' Education and Student Study Aspirations:periphery to centre – percentages – Westedge

Families: Indigenous and non-indigenous

Trajectories from school to work are about matching, and adjusting, the available family and educational resources with aspirations, where a major factor for success is "the propensity of families and children to invest in education" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 216). Bourdieu claims reliance on education and attitude to school depend on expectations of success at school and the extent that the school will reproduce individual and group social position and value. Developing these dispositions is an aim in the Queensland Act through the involvement of parents as partners with the school, with an eye to creating knowledgeable use of education between generations of families. In this section and the next, a brief cross-generational sketch is given, first with a comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous families in Westedge, followed by a contrast across seven schools from the southeast to the southwest. Information on parents' work was collected from individual state primary and high school students; 499 in total – 101 Indigenous and 398 non-Indigenous. The various family types, such as "both work", "carer is at home, no father", are used to understand variations in the volume of family resources within a household. No moral hierarchy is intended. A comparison of work patterns for Indigenous and non-Indigenous families is shown in Table 3. What stands out is that nearly nine in ten non-Indigenous children have at least one parent in paid work. This occurs for four in ten Indigenous children; a case of structural inequality.

The contrast between family resources is made clearer when mothers' and fathers' work is cross-tabulated within each group. When an Indigenous mother is not working, eight in ten fathers will also not be working. Eight in ten fathers of Indigenous children will either be absent from the home or unemployed when the mother is at home performing domestic duties or on a pension. However, when the mother is a semi-skilled worker, then one third of fathers are in work, rising to 65 percent when the mother is a skilled worker or in the public service. The situation is inverted for children of non-Indigenous mothers. When a non-Indigenous mother is performing domestic duties or on a pension, 80 percent of fathers will be working. When she is a semi-skilled worker, 85 percent of fathers are in work, rising to 90 percent when the mother is in skilled work or in the public service. Family resources are therefore vastly different for the generations of non-Indigenous children in school in Westedge than they are for Indigenous children.

Student aspirations and parents' education: Centre-to-periphery comparisons

Educational aspirations are reliant on the volume of educational resources within a family. Years a parent has spent at school and knowledge of the tertiary system are resources. In this section a comparison is made of the volume of resources of this type in seven schools from Westedge in the southwest to Brisbane, that is, from the periphery to the centre. The shaded section of Table 4 shows years of fathers' education. Nearly six in ten parents of students in Year 12 at the two southwest schools (Westedge and Southwest 1) have no more than nine years of education. Eight in ten students are the first in their families to complete high school, as is the case with Darling Downs 1 high school. In contrast, in the Brisbane metropolitan high school in a high socio-economic suburb, eight in ten students have a father with Year 12, or a degree (six in ten). A similar situation exists in the Toowoomba high school and Darling Downs 2, places with highly productive industries, a TAFE institute and within two hours drive from Brisbane. The largest variations in family use of education from the periphery are between the southwest, the outer regions of the Darling Downs and the high school in Brisbane's outer suburbs.

Not surprisingly, differences in students' knowledge of the tertiary system follow the same pattern. In the same survey, students were asked to nominate a course of study after school and to identify an institution offering the course. Both were correctly identified in eight of ten students from the Brisbane metropolitan school and seven of ten instances for the high schools in Toowoomba and Darling Downs 2, figures that match a parent's participation in education. Knowledge of the system is, or seems to be spread in roughly comparable percentages across the remainder of the seven schools.

Conclusion

Westedge is a town where young people whose parents attended nine to ten years at school are being asked to stay for twelve years. These young people are entering a workforce not so different from that of their parents, with employers not expecting, or wanting, much of what schools teach. The main reasons for writing this paper stems from reflections on attempts to act upon an educational problem known and learnt about in research in a small country town. In other words, what stood in the way of implementing recommendations made from a sustained period of government-funded research? Even knowing the process involves a struggle, an ideal prevails that rationality underpins the procedures of democratic policy. But policymaking is in fact separated from power over the process which constrains bureaucratic decisions (even with the best of intentions) (Flyvberg, 2001, p. 143). This separation, Flyvberg

contends, creates a "blind spot" for understanding "weaknesses" when "ideals impact with reality". Bureaucratic reality is within priorities and targets; a process where strategy success means being attuned to centralised vocabulary and government bureaucratic practices. In particular, why having recommendations acted on means one has to be in the "perpetual present" and "pitching the project" to players close to the day-to-day process of government? The process involves joining inevitable queue to officials and directors-general and pitching a project within budget and ministerial priorities. It is for reasons such as these that lobby groups form; appoint spokespersons to speak on their behalf and employ specialists to prepare and present submissions. I do not wish to speak against these forms of policy implementation, but want instead to address the issue of getting the context right and situating that case within the system of schooling and local economic structure; which is the reason for taking the method of the limiting case as a core concept.

The use of the limiting case is in line with a challenge raised by Michael Cole (1993, p. 1) to create "sustainable model systems of diversity". Children's experiences, Cole says, are shaped by the settings that their parents and other adults inhabit and the economic activities that sustain the community. The puzzle is not so much about policy providing observable effects, but of understanding why the effects do not hold. Cole, for instance, evaluated 168 experimental programs from the 1960s in the USA. He found achievement for minorities could be raised to those of whites in the 1960s, their effectiveness continued in only a fraction of classrooms in the 1980s. To be sustainable, policy needs to come to terms with areas that do not fit priorities and targets and include them with a real sense of purpose. A conceptual break is required between policies and research that models system effects and those that explore variance and diversity and sustainability in these conditions. Becker (1998, p. 83), with whom this paper started, suggests a break relies on a change from why to *how* questions and provision of a new image. The Queensland Act, and policy on school retention, states *why* it is necessary to have all young people in work or study. The image is a seamless network. The alternative is to ask *how*, in some cases, it became possible to have economies not fitting the model. The image is one of weak ties lacking bridges to pathways.

The argument throughout this paper has been that limiting, or nonconforming cases are good tests in research for generalisation and for extending a concept's reach. The method has been utilised in this paper to show one town, Westedge, as being compressed within a broad model as being comparable on learning and earning criteria for engagement. In fact, close-knit analysis allows more relevant factors to surface and the limiting case adjusts the focus on the town. This done, there is a clearer picture of where and why certain places are not fitting policy regulations for learning or earning in Queensland. Remoteness is a key factor. But, even more so are

the economic conditions of a service town. Westedge is largely uncoupled from industries in the district. Professionals and paraprofessionals largely transfer in and out of the town; locals gaining such qualifications seldom return. But, stark as this might seem to those who would want to see mobility stories in a remote service town, what happens in Westedge is probably a factor shared across certain urban settings. These are suburbs, for example, whose economic conditions are such that they attract private and government social service providers, where there are also members of the legal, medical, teaching professions owning businesses and earning a living, but few of these groups would reside there in any great numbers; if at all. Yes, there are success stories, but these do not alter structural conditions of town or suburb. These are the "structural challenges" mentioned in the Queensland Act. They are and can be met through use of social and economic networking underpinning policies on pathways upon which the Queensland legislation rests. Networking (e.g., the Whittlesea program, mentioned earlier) attempts to embed individually customised pathways within a local community and provides mentoring to address specific barriers to successful school-to-labour market transitions. These and other programs tend not to be implemented beyond regions or in rural areas with TAFE facilities and some strong industry support (Funnell & Tully, 2004). This points again to limits within policy by targets when compared with sharpening the focus by describing conditions parents and children and employers and employees inhabit; the economic activities that sustain their existence. Policy makers might baulk at the thought of taking the places hardest to fit into planning, development and implementation, politicians might be less likely to say a regulation or a policy is "for all", but unlocking these cases is one step towards the growth and sustainability suggested by Michael Cole.

I will conclude by addressing a referee's comment on a previous draft of this paper; a constructive review, but one suggesting either submission to a rural journal or making changes to meet this journal's specialist audience. With no disrespect, this highlights a dilemma for "rural" research and policy, which in part is the history of its category. To exist, rural education has had to protect its place in a hierarchy of target groups, where the stakes are for funding of lobby groups, and for research and publications. While this solidifies the category, it lessens the impact and scope of rural cases to broaden educational research and policy debates. Working with a method of limiting cases allows for more accurate descriptions across a spectrum of rural areas and an opportunity to find commonalities within rural, urban and regional conditions.

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