

MAKING THE CHOICE TO GO TO UNIVERSITY: THE IMPACT OF RURALITY

This research was undertaken in conjunction with Keith Grammar staff and pupils and was published in Educational Psychology in Scotland in Autumn 2012.

Introduction

There have been a number of studies looking at issues surrounding rurality and how growing up in a rural area may affect post-school choices. Studies have looked at the 'rural idyll' with findings suggesting that rather than feeling a sense of belonging to their rural community, and in contrast to adults and young children, young people felt excluded, isolated and detached, and perceive themselves as highly visible. Shucksmith (2004) comments that young people felt they had 'no voice' in their rural community and had "issues of identity and visibility of living in small communities" (p.45). Glendinning et al (2003) identified low availability of age-appropriate social opportunities, poor local employment prospects and transport difficulties as contributing to young people's negative experiences of living in a rural community. Despite this, when it comes to making a choice about where to study a higher education course, the literature suggests that young people from rural areas may wish to remain in their community. For example, Midgley & Bradshaw (2006) explored the experiences of 16 to 19 year olds in rural areas at the time of leaving compulsory education, finding that, "for some young people, the strength of the local community and the fears of city life were considerations when deciding whether they would leave the area - particularly those going to university and living away from home". In a study by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2009), analysing migration trends, the main reasons for staying in the area to study were stated as being in close proximity to friends and family (94% of respondents) and feeling a strong sense of affinity for the area (92% of respondents).

Studies looking at why some young people from rural areas withdraw from higher education courses have also highlighted perceived negative consequences of moving away to study. As part of a study looking at social exclusion, Pavis, Platt & Hubbard (2000) highlight that the important difference between young people living in rural and urban areas is that those in rural areas have to leave their home, social networks and support structures to attend higher education, leading to an increased financial burden in setting up home.

Background

The basis of the current study emerged following conversations with the guidance staff at Keith Grammar School. They were concerned about how prepared their school leavers were for leaving the area to embark on a course of study at university. There is no implication that university is the only legitimate choice for academic youngsters. However, the guidance staff perceived rurality as a major factor in young peoples' choices, with some young people deciding not to go on to university, despite having the academic potential to do so. The present study

aimed to explore these issues, and to identify ways to further support these young people in their transition to university.

Methodology

The project was carried out in a rural secondary school in Moray and involved:

1. Semi-structured interviews with twelve S5 and S6 pupils (conducted by 3 x S6 pupils)
2. A focus group interview with the three guidance staff at the school.

1. Semi-structured interviews with S5 and S6 pupils

Researchers have involved children and young people in carrying out research in various ways, and with different levels of involvement as 'active researchers' or 'co-researchers'. In the present study, three S6 pupils were co-researchers on the project, involved in shaping the research design and carrying out interviews with S5 and S6 pupils. With 'first hand' knowledge of the potential issues, it was felt that utilising pupil co-researchers would facilitate the gathering of information from their peers. The co-researchers met regularly with an Educational Psychology Assistant to facilitate this process. Space precludes a detailed description but the key stages were as follows:

- An initial exploration' of the issues surrounding the research question, 'How prepared for university are young people from rural areas?' took place. The co-researchers highlighted a number of issues.
- These issues informed the development of a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview schedule included questions about their intended post-school destination and questions about how young people could be better prepared for higher education.
- An initial 'screening' questionnaire identified pupils who had decided not to go to university, or who were undecided. Twelve pupils were subsequently interviewed.

When asked why they had decided not to go on to higher education, responses included:

- Avoiding debt
- Wanting to earn money straight away
- Not wanting to study further
- Worry over unemployment following further study.

It is interesting to note that some of the issues identified by the co-researchers in the 'exploration' session (e.g. concerns about independent living skills; concerns about making new friendships; and lack of confidence about entering a university environment) were not reflected in their responses as reasons why they had **personally** decided not to go on to higher education. However, when asked to think of ways in which they and their peers could be better prepared for higher education, responses from the young people did reflect some of these issues. For example, suggestions included:

- Earlier planning in order to feel more prepared for the transition from school to university

- Further information about university life and supported visits to open days
- Additional discussions about different options and alternatives to college and university, in order to make an informed choice
- Further support in developing skills for independent living (e.g. managing finances, domestic skills) at an earlier stage

2. Focus group interview with guidance staff

Three members of staff were involved in a 45 minute audio-recorded focus group discussion with the Educational Psychology Assistant. The staff discussed a number of issues relating to the rural area. These included:

- The lack of placements in the area for pupils considering medicine or veterinary practice
- A perception that some pupils might only consider the locally accessible options that their parents had (e.g. working on the family farm; doing an apprenticeship)
- The relatively protected environment of a small and rural school. Comments included:
 - *“I don’t think our kids have got that much confidence compared to some of the other young folk that we come across”*
 - *“They tend to be more reticent”, “*
 - *Our kids are not pushy”*
 - *“...this is a small school. Our kids are quite protected here”.*

As part of the discussion, staff drew on experiences of past pupils who began a university course but subsequently left. They commented that some young people found home life and university life too different. They referred to one pupil who had grown up on a farm and found living at university too noisy. Furthermore, he was used to fitting farm work around school work, and found the structure of university lectures left too much free time.

Conclusions

Transition from school to university is a time of new experiences, and for some young people more than others, it may also be a time of risk and anxiety. For young people from rural areas, the difference between their current school and university may seem wider than for their more urban counterparts, and the strength of the local community may be an important factor in their decisions (Midgely & Bradshaw, 2006). Both pupil co-researcher and staff responses in this study reflect that being part of a relatively small rural school is an important factor in pupils’ post-school choices.

Despite limitations, this small-scale study suggests that there are many factors influencing the decisions of young people from rural areas considering higher education options, and may warrant further investigation. Preparing young people from rural areas for university may require a more structured, enhanced transition approach in order that young people can confidently make the right choices.