

Young People's Subjective Understandings of Early School Leaving in Rural Areas

by

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## **List of abbreviations**

ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics

AEU: Australian Education Union

CS: Continuing Student

CSs: Continuing Students

DSF: Dusseldorp Skills Forum

EGRIS: European Group for Integrated Social Research

ESL: Early School Leaver

ESLs: Early School Leavers

HREOC: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

ILO: International Labour Organization

NHMRC: National Health and Medical Research Council

UN: United Nations

## **Introduction**

Contemporary youth transitions are characterised by young people's movement in and out a range of labour market and non-labour market activities during the post-school years (European Group for Integrated Social research [EGRIS] 2001: 102; Looker and Dwyer: 1997: 8). This reflects not only changes within the economy, but also the individualised and creative ways in which young people seek to achieve autonomy (Jamrozik 1998: 76; Wyn and White 2000: 167). A significant percentage of young people experiences transitions characterised by long periods of unemployment or precarious employment (Marks and McMillan 2001: 6; Wyn and White 2004: 170). These troubled transitions are associated with marginalisation and risks that threaten the young people's health and wellbeing and jeopardise the potential contributions they may make (Maguire and Rennison 2005: 199; Ryan 2003: v; Choi 2005: 278).

It is estimated that each year 50000 young Australians between the age of fifteen and nineteen are not registered in further education, training or sustainable employment (Dusseldorp Skills Forum [DSF] 2005: 5) with rural young people overrepresented within this group (Australian Education Union [AEU]: 1999: 8). This study attempts to shed light on how the experiences of this group of young people are shaped by the intersection between rurality, multiple forms of social disadvantage and changing economic conditions to result in choices to leave school early (Alloway et al. 2004: 208).

## **Chapter One: Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the literature relating to school retention in Australian government high schools. It focuses on three main areas: the sociology of youth, education policy research on youth retention, and the sociology of education with special attention paid to young people living in rural areas.

### ***The concept of youth***

Wyn and White (1997: 11) refer to youth as ‘the social processes whereby age is socially constructed, institutionalized and controlled in historically and culturally specific ways’. From this perspective, youth is a social construction. Sociologists argue that the term refers to a distinct transition period in the lifecycle, situated between childhood and adulthood, which originated in the booming WW2 economy and denotes a period characterised by freedom, leisure and consumption (Davis 1999: 21). While adolescence is a physiological developmental phase, it is also a social category framed by particular social institutions. For example, youth is institutionalised in the education system as eventually leading to the status of adulthood. This ‘deficit’ approach constructs young people as a marginalised group which is not entitled to full citizenship (Wyn and White 2004: 87; Mizen 2004).

Most major organisations define youth as all 15-24 years-olds including the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2005), International Labour Organization [ILO] (2004: 1) and the United Nations [UN] (2003: 55). Traditional markers of the transition from youth

to adulthood include completing school, leaving home, beginning a career and marrying (Shanahan et al. 2005: 225; te Riele 2004: 244). However, the linear pathway implicit in these indicators have become blurred in Western societies as education has become extended into adulthood and family formation postponed (Wyn and White 1997: 96; Raffe 2001: 4).

### ***The effect of globalisation on the youth labour market***

Young people have been especially affected by the economic restructuring associated with globalisation. The transformation from a manufacturing to a service economy has been linked to the decline in permanent, full-time jobs in the youth labour market and a corresponding rise in low skilled part-time and casual work (Jamrozik 1998: 76; Wooden 1998: 34-35). These developments have been accompanied by the expansion of education as a result of the rise in credentialism and education policies designed to increase education retention (DSF 2004: 4; Wyn 1998: 113). Although some early school leavers<sup>1</sup> do obtain secure manual jobs (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000: 48), in general they lack the credentials necessary to enter the well paid and secure jobs of the service economy (Thomson 2002: 53; Sullivan 2001: 20). The negative effects of globalisation are especially acute in rural communities where the decline in small businesses severely affects young people's employment opportunities (Epps and Soerensen 1996: 156).

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<sup>1</sup>The acronym ESLs is hereafter used to refer to early school leavers and CSs to continuing students. In the analysis the acronym ESL (early school leaver) and CS (continuing student) will be tied to a participant's name when this will assist with understanding the argument.

This indicates that young people's labour market experiences are not homogenous. Early school leaving is consistently linked to low socio-economic background and high unemployment (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000: 55; Marks and McMillan 2003: 88).

Young women outnumber and outperform young men as secondary and tertiary education graduates, but are underrepresented in many educational pathways that offer the most promising labour market and career prospects. Young women are more likely to work part-time and less likely to be in the labour force than young men who are more likely to work full-time and to be unemployed (Teese et al. 1995: 107; Lamb and McKenzie 2001: 28).

Young rural people, especially males, are less likely to be in post-compulsory education and more likely to participate in apprenticeships than their urban counterparts (Johns et al. 2004: 9; Abbott-Chapman 2001: 26). Even though rural young women stay in education longer than their male counterparts they face greater risks of unemployment (Creswell and Underwood 2004: vi; Alloway et al. 2004: 51). Yet overall long-term unemployment is less severe for rural youth than urban youth (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000: 46) with some rural ESLs exiting their education to take up manual employment, 'however limited and casual' (Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick 2001: 44).

### ***Risk and education retention***

Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) argue that globalisation has resulted in the detraditionalisation of society. The declining influence of family, work, employment and community sets individuals free to construct their identities in the 'reflexive project of the



self' rather than having them ascribed by social forces (Giddens 1991: 76). Consumption patterns play a key role in signalling similarities or differences between social groups. However, as well as bringing freedom and choice, social restructuring has also brought risks such as unemployment and uncertainty about the future. These risks are not evenly distributed but benefit those with higher levels of education while creating specific risks for ESLs.

Polk and White (1999: 284) argue that the decline of traditional pathways from school to work has increased the engagement of some young people, especially young males, in marginal activities. The association between early school leaving and engagement in marginal activities is especially acute in rural areas (Marks and McMillan: 2003: 54; Sweet 1998: 6). The lack of access to education, employment and leisure is associated with higher rates of substance use amongst rural youth (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 1999: 20; Wyn, Stokes, Stafford 1998: 17; White 1999: 18), higher pregnancy rates for young rural women and higher suicide rates for young rural men (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003; Graham 1994: 409).

Rural youth studies have also found strong evidence of gender stereotyping (Quixley 1992; Wierenga 2001) and stigmatisation in relation to non-conformity including homosexuality (Wyn, Stokes, Stafford: 1998; Emslie 1999: 161). These findings suggest that Connell's insights into gender regimes (2005) may be relevant to rural areas where the dominance of traditional gender roles may be a factor implicated in early school leaving.

## ***Sociological theories of education***

Early attempts to explain educational success and failure drew on Marxist concepts of class. Bowles and Gintis' correspondence theory (1976) argued that schools replicate the hierarchical division of labour and reproduce the social relations of the workplace. Willis (1977) and Connell et al. (1982, 1983) introduced notions of agency into neo-Marxist theories of education by focusing on the intersection between objective settings and the subjective experiences of students. They explained educational failure as the unintentional outcome of working class students' rebellion against what they saw as the hypocrisy of a supposedly meritocratic system. Later work by theorists such as Bourdieu (1990) attempted to move further away from structuralist explanations and to acknowledge the role of culture as an autonomous sphere (Hall 1996: 6; Althusser 1971).

Bourdieu (1990, 1977) developed the idea of cultural capital to describe how the differing degree of cultural knowledge possessed by families advantages students from middle class backgrounds because the academic culture of schools builds on the cultural capital of the middle class. He argued that teachers play an active role in reproducing inequalities as they reward students who possess high levels of cultural capital. Bourdieu later developed the concept of social capital, the social networks of families and their relationships, to further explain how non-economic factors are implicated in success and failure at school (Bourdieu 1990 & 1986; Robbins 1991: 32). Bourdieu argued that the differing levels of cultural capital among social groups are produced through the habitus which internalises objective structures and naturalises them in subjective practices. Social, cultural and economic disposition is made possible through the habitus, and

students from working class backgrounds do not have access to the middle class habitus which is necessary to succeed school and beyond (Harker 1984: 119). The concepts of cultural capital and the habitus enabled Bourdieu to insert agency into a Marxist framework without falling into economic reductionism (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 1990: 1). However, critics (e.g. Brubaker 1985; Connell 1983; Gorder 1980; Schwartz 1977) have drawn attention to the problem of determinism because Bourdieu's conception of action does not account for struggle and change.

Bourdieu moved beyond the problem of determinism in *Distinctions* (1984) by conceptualising cultural consumption and taste as key signifiers of social class (Jenkins, 1992: 138). Contemporary sociologists theorising the relation between cultural consumption and stratification systems draw on this idea (e.g. Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999). In particular, Peterson (1992, 1997) used the term 'cultural omnivores' to express the idea that cultural consumption is no longer hierarchical, and Emmison (2003) has linked cultural omnivores to cultural mobility.

Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital have been widely used in educational research and rural community studies. Kenyon et al. (2001: 35) found that the value of education is not obvious to some rural families and James et al. (1999: 90) found that young rural people lack relevant role models to demonstrate the 'encouraging effects of cultural capital'. Devine (2005) uses the idea of social capital to demonstrate how middle class families use their social networks to ensure their children's educational success. In rural Tasmania Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2001, 2002) and Kilpatrick, Field and

Falk (2001) found that high levels of social capital helped young ESLs obtain jobs in their local area, thereby trapping them in a rural labour market.

### ***Social policy research on education retention***

Retention to Year 10 in Australia has been nearly 100 per cent since 1988 (Collins, Kenway and McCleod 2000: 32). However, some young people leave the education system as soon as they are legally entitled to, at age 15 or 16 (Dockery 2005: 4). The key variables influencing retention in Years 11 and 12 are gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, ethnicity, school sector and achievement (Collins, Kenway and McCleod 2000<sup>2</sup>; Fullarton et al. 2003; Marks and McMillan 2003). Nationally, the retention rate in 2004 from Year 10 to 12 for girls was 82.1 per cent and for boys 72.3 per cent (ABS 2004: 19). Examining participation in Year 12, Fullarton et al. (2003) found a 15 per cent difference between the highest and lowest of six socio-economic groups, and an eight per cent difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Previous school achievement was associated with a 31 per cent difference between the highest and the lowest of four groups categorised in order of achievement. In 2004, retention rates to Years 11 and 12 were 77.6 per cent for government schools compared to 86.6 per cent for non-government schools (ABS 2004: 22).

Qualitative studies suggest that factors associated with obtaining employment such as 'earning my own money' (Alloway and Gilbert 2001: 8; Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick

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<sup>2</sup>Collins, Kenway and McCleod (2000) is the most comprehensive study of school retention to date. However, as the data is over six years old, this study draws primarily on data from more recent studies.

2001: 62) are the main influences on early school leaving. These factors interlink with school related factors such as poor teacher-students relationships or not ‘doing well at school’ (Brown et al. 2001; Smyth et al. 2000). One study found that family conflict impacted on decisions to leave school early (Brooks et al. 1997: 14). Other factors include distance to college, financial barriers (Quixley 1992; Alloway et al. 2004), and attachment to place (Hillier 1996: 10-11), often facilitated by sport (Wyn and Stokes 1998: 40).

Young, rural ESLs from low socio-economic backgrounds, especially males, form ‘the most disadvantaged labour market group’ (Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman 2002; James et al. 1999: 5). Whilst it is known that this group of young people exit education to take up manual employment, questions remain about whether rurality acts as an independent variable (Fullarton et al. 2003), or whether its significance stems from its association with low socio-economic status (Jones 2002).

### ***Conclusion and research questions***

Whilst quantitative studies have revealed which variables are implicated in young people’s decisions to leave school early, there is uncertainty about how variables such as rurality and class are implicated in early school leaving. In particular, there are questions about the relationship between the variables of rurality, class and education retention. Some studies suggest that qualitative research can shed light on these questions by revealing how young people construct their educational choices (Looker and Dwyer

1997: 9; Wyn and White 2000: 168). It is in this area that this study seeks to make a contribution.

This research project aims to explore rural Grade 10 students' subjective understandings of their future educational choices in order to shed light on the relatively low education retention rates of this group. This is achieved by accessing young people's own accounts of how rurality is implicated in their educational choices and how this intersects with other variables such as school experiences, social location and social networks. The project is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do rural Grade 10 students subjectively understand their future educational choices, especially those who have decided or are considering leaving school early?
2. How does their sense of place, school experiences and their relationships with family and community shape their future educational choices?
3. What other factors do rural Grade 10 students identify as shaping their future educational choices?

This is an exploratory study.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

### ***Methodology***

This study adopted a qualitative methodology. Its concern with ‘meaning questions’ (Walter 2006: 35) makes a qualitative approach most suitable. Qualitative methodology is rooted in Husserl’s phenomenology and the impetus that the generation of knowledge places upon reality as consciously experienced (Grbich 1999: 4). Qualitative methodology is concerned with understanding the participant’s ‘life-world’; her everyday practices and habitual world (Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 3). It is informed by a broader interpretive social science paradigm which sees human beings as capable of creating meaning through social interaction. Consequently it is underpinned by a constructionist epistemology (Grbich 1999: 7; Neuman 1991: 50).

The research questions focus on how young rural people create meaning through their relationships. This assumes an emic approach which offers an insider’s account of how young rural people make sense of their lives (Silverman 2001: 227). Weber’s concept of ‘verstehen’ suggests that empathetic listening affords a way for the researcher to share the culture of the interviewee (Neuman 1991: 50). Ezzy (2002: 24) suggests that the hermeneutic practices of relating parts to the whole through listening, reflecting and asking questions allow the researcher to absorb the meanings embedded in human action. This suggests the keys to drawing out the subjective meanings from the participants are questioning, listening and observing.

## ***Methods***

Semi-structured, in-depths interviews were conducted in this study (Rubin and Rubin 2004: 43-44). They were guided by a flexible interview schedule evolving around the general themes of family, community and education with open-ended questions used to encourage the participants to discuss these themes. The technique of funnelling steered these general themes into more intimate areas such as the participants' relations to family and community (Travers 2006: 98). These techniques permitted 'thick' descriptions which helped to shed light on the participants' inner world (Geertz 1973). The interview guide was piloted on a Grade 9 and a 10 student from another rural high school and adjusted accordingly.

The one-hour interviews were conducted at the School in a private room during school time. Specific techniques were employed to allow the participants to tell their stories at their own pace (Travers 2006: 98). The interview commenced with an exercise designed to provide a non-threatening point of departure. The 'practice wisdom' (Shulman 2004: 219) of the researcher, developed in her role as a teacher, suggests that students are more comfortable in social situations where verbal and non-verbal activities are combined. For this reason participants were presented with eight cards (see Appendix) with images that the retention literature suggests represent topics of significant value for young people in transition (Abbott-Chapman 2001; Wierenga 2001). These were: staying in my local area, going to another town/city, my family, getting a job and earning money, staying in education and getting qualifications, having a good career, getting married and having children. By asking the participants to rate four cards in



order of importance, this allowed them engage in the interview without having to say anything.

The power relations entailed in the interviewer's role as a part-time teacher at the School had the potential to inhibit the respondents from speaking openly about their school experiences (Neuman 2004: 48). The topic of early school leaving was therefore presented indirectly in a hypothetical scenario about two students leaving Grade 10<sup>3</sup>. One student wanted to work in the local town, the other planned to go to College. The researcher then asked the participants their opinion on their choices, and also what their friends and family would think.

Some direct questions were asked such as 'what do you think your education and career options are after Grade 10?' and 'how do you see yourself in ten years' time?' However, most topics were covered elliptically as the participants spontaneously spoke about their chosen cards, and also about their reasons for not choosing other cards.

### ***The sample***

The sample population was rural Grade 10 students deciding whether to leave or continue their education. The selection criteria for the sample were an even balance of students who fell into one of the following categories:

1. Students who had decided to leave the education system completely or who were undecided about what to do.

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<sup>3</sup> The gender used in the scenario was altered to match that of the participant.

2. Students who had decided to continue their education.

The young people were recruited from current Year 10 students attending Hillsville High School<sup>4</sup>, a public secondary school located in an area of low retention in regional Tasmania. As recruiting respondents was anticipated to be challenging no attempt to sample for variables other than rurality was made. Nonetheless, there was an expectation that the participants would include a gender mix and that some participants would be from working class backgrounds.

Hillsville is located in a geographically isolated area with an abundance of natural resources. Opportunities for manual labour remain strong in industries such as agriculture, fishing, mining and manufacturing, but youth unemployment among 15-19-year-olds is 17.2% (Tasmanian Labour Economics Office 2006).

There are many definitions of rurality, but for the purposes of this study Wyn, Stokes and Stafford's (1998: 6) conceptualisation of rurality as 'all areas outside of capital cities and major urban conglomerates' was the most useful.

A young person in this sample is a Grade 10 student who is aged between 15-16 years. Youth in transition was conceptualised as all Grade 10 students who have reached the legal age of school leaving and are deciding whether to continue or leave the education system. The education system was conceptualised and operationalised as any full-time or part-time education leading to formal qualifications.

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<sup>4</sup> The pseudonym 'Hillsville' is used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Education retention was conceptualised as students formally enrolled in Grade 10. Early school leaving refers to those students who are considering leaving school before or on completion of Year 10.

The concept of class was understood not so much as a social category but rather as what people did with resources and relationships. It was conceptualised and operationalised in terms of Bourdieu's (1990) concept of cultural capital: 'a form of value associated with consumption patterns, lifestyle choices, social attributes and formal qualifications and awards' (Webb et al. 2002: x). Bourdieu's (1990, 1986) concept of social capital, the social networks of individuals and their families, was also integral to the interview schedule and the analysis. In the analysis these concepts were sometimes used as one concept as they often interact. Bourdieu (1986) also refers to economic capital, the 'command over economic resources', but because this study focuses on exploring subjectivities and social practices the central focus is on cultural capital.

Bourdieu's (1990: 67) concept of the habitus was conceptualised as a set of social, cultural and economic dispositions which are inculcated and internalised in the individual through objective structures and manifested and perpetuated in the social practices of the individual.

Risk (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) was also a key concept. Beck (1992: 21) defines risk as 'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernity itself'. Risk in this study was conceptualised as the uncertainties specific to

contemporary society such as heightened job insecurity and the declining influence of tradition which means that decisions of all kinds present risks for individuals.

This study employed a self-selected sampling strategy. The researcher visited three Grade 10 classes to explain what the study was about, to answer any questions and to distribute the Letter of Invitation and Information Sheet to the students. A tick box was used for the young people to indicate whether they were interested in participating, and whether or not they were CSs. The document was placed in individual envelopes, collected by a student and delivered to the School's administration office. School staff posted an Information package to those parents whose child had expressed interest in participating. If the completed parental consent form was returned to the researcher she then phoned the students to arrange the interview.

This study originally focused exclusively on ESLs, but due to a low response rate from this group it was broadened to include all Grade 10 students. In total six CSs were recruited and seven ESLs, including six undecided, although during the interviews a further two revealed that they had decided to leave school early.<sup>5</sup>

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim as data was collected to allow the researcher to identify preliminary themes and modify the interview guide (Ezzy 2002: 70). A thematic analysis took place through open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990). A code was first assigned to meaningful segments of text,

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<sup>5</sup> The students who have decided to leave school early and students who are undecided have been merged into the category of 'early school leavers' because the students who were unsure said they felt inclined towards early school leaving.

then subcategories were identified and core themes emerged. Themes and sub-themes were finally amalgamated or subdivided and located within previous research and the theoretical paradigm (Grbich 1999: 234).

The themes were analysed using Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus. The concept of cultural capital was central to the analysis and provided a theoretical lens through which to explore how the young people's sense of place, school experiences and relationships with family and community differed according to their cultural knowledge and practices. The concept of social capital assisted this analysis by providing a tool to understand how the young people's cultural knowledge was mediated by their social networks. Because these different forms of capital intersect and create different social, cultural and economic dispositions through the habitus, this concept captured how young rural people subjectively understand their choices to continue or leave formal education.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The young age of the students (15-16 years of age) placed them in a group recognised by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [NHMRC] as vulnerable as they were under the legal age for many activities. For this reason participation was subject to written parental consent.

Consultations with School staff suggested that the return rate from a mailing to parents inviting their offsprings' participation would be very low and that some face

to face contact was necessary. A second factor affecting voluntary consent was the need to ensure that the students understood that the study was independent of their school studies. For this reason, a self-selected recruitment strategy was chosen.

The Information Sheet explained that the study was separate from School activities and that whether students participated or not would not influence any aspect of their schooling. To ensure that consent was entirely voluntary and informed the researcher explained the research requirements before asking the participants to sign the Consent Form.

Anonymity and confidentiality were protected by the collection of minimal identifying material (i.e. name and phone number) which no one other than the researcher saw. Any potentially identifying information about the participants, or comments about a teacher or any identifiable person, were collapsed into generalised data or recorded in a way which disguised the person's identity. Potentially identifying material that was not amenable to this treatment was omitted even if it would have contributed to the analysis. All interview material was transcribed using pseudonyms. The code-breaker was kept in a locked filing cabinet separate from the interview material.

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Tasmanian Department of Education and ethical clearance was provided by Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network.

## ***Opportunities and limitations***

Qualitative in-depth interviews facilitated rich ideographic descriptions of the participants. This contrasts with quantitative analysis which provides nomothetic explanations and covers a broad range of issues, but ignores the ways in which people make sense of the world in terms of emotions, beliefs and feelings (Babbie 2002: 18; Strauss and Corbin 1990: 19). The time consuming process of conducting the in-depth interviews restricted the number of participants, resulting in non-generalisable findings (Travers 2006: 86).

Babbie (2002: 268) suggests that unstructured interviews afford a better understanding of the participant's lifeworld, but he also recognises that the lack of structure can result in the absence of relevant interview material. For this reason the interviews in this study were divided into the themes of family, community and education.

A common critique of the in-depth interview is that the researcher may shape the participant's responses or interpret the findings subjectively resulting in 'interviewer influence' (Travers 2006: 102). Therefore a conscious effort was made to 'listen' to the data rather than approaching it with preconceived ideas (Shipman 1997: 43).

Working under the broader paradigm of interpretivism is essentially to work under the researcher's own 'frames of reference' and the assumptions she brings to the research (Babbie 2002: 27). Empathetic listening and hermeneutic practices allowed the

interviewer access to the participant's lifeworld thereby minimizing the impact of her own subjective interpretations.

The main limitation of the sampling strategy was its potential for sample skewing.

The sample in this study was skewed towards working class students, possibly due to the tendency of wealthier rural families to send their children to boarding schools. It is furthermore possible that students who knew that their parents disapproved of their desire to leave school did not volunteer. Finally, six of the seven ESLs in this study are experiencing distressing circumstances. This may be due to sample skewing due to reasons associated with the recruitment process.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Details are withheld for ethical reasons.



## **Chapter Three: Results and Discussion**

### ***The participants***

The seven participants considering leaving school early included four young men and three young women. Three males and three females identified as CSs. To assist with the understanding of the analysis a short overview of the participants and their career choices is provided. In reviewing this material it is helpful to understand that for the young people of Hillsville, continuing their education means moving away from home or significant travel to the nearest regional College.

**Jane** might go to College, but she is also thinking of getting a job in town so she does not have to leave the area.

**Jill** would like to go to College but she thinks she will most likely get a job in town because she does not want to leave her parent.

**Susan** would like to go to College, but she does not want to leave Hillsville so she might get a job instead.

**Anthony** has decided to work on a relative's farm after Grade 10

**Ben** is going to work in manual labour after Grade 10 and work out what he wants to do.

**Justin** would like to go to university but does not know what to study. Instead he might find a job in town.

**Lucas** plans to work after Grade 10 to sort out what he wants to do.

**Jonathan** has decided to stay in Hillsville and travel to the nearest regional College after Grade 10.

**Nick** has decided to move to the nearest regional centre after Grade 10 and attend College there.











**Peter** has decided to stay in Hillsville and travel to the nearest regional College after Grade 10.

**Anna** has chosen to stay in Hillsville and travel to the nearest College after Grade 10 with her friends.

**Claire** also wants to stay in Hillsville and travel to the nearest College after Grade 10.

**Kate** wants to continue living with her parents in Hillsville and travel to the nearest College after Grade 10.

**Table 1:** Key Themes and Sub-themes Generated from the Young People’s Stories

Key Themes	Sub-themes
 <i>Life in a small rural community</i>	
1. Growing up in Hillsville 2. A rural habitus	1.1 Feelings of ambiguity 1.2 Stigmatisation 1.3 Labelling 2.1 Love of the land 2.2 Perceptions of the city
 <i>Family life</i>	
3. Family culture 4. The importance of ‘knowing’	3.1 Family practices 3.2 Family breakdown 3.3 Dysfunctional families 4.1 Local and global worlds 4.2 Local cultural capital 4.3 Cultural omnivores
 <i>Young people and leisure</i>	
5. The familiar world of sport 6. The cultural hierarchy of leisure	5.1 Sport as a source of solidarity 6.1 Cultural consumption 6.2 The lack of leisure activities 6.3 Hegemonic masculinity and exclusion
 <i>Education</i>	
7. The value of education 8. The role of teachers	7.1 Recognising the value of education 7.2 Institutionalised cultural capital 8.1 Habitus and school experiences
 <i>Transition choices</i>	
9. Developing personal autonomy 10. Distance to College 11. Individualised career choices	9.1. Getting a job 9.2 Establishing a family 9.3 Accumulating cultural capital 10.1 Geographical and social worlds 11.2 ‘Being different, being me’

The table shows the centrality of the family in the young people’s lives and indicates how their social and cultural capital permeates all aspects of their lives.

## ***Life in a small rural community***

### **Growing up in Hillsville**

A key theme of the young people's accounts were their feelings of ambiguity about life in Hillsville. They describe Hillsville as a relaxed little town free from the hustle and bustle of the city. Walking up the street and 'knowing everyone' is one of the best things about the town; there is 'always someone to talk to', 'always someone who cares'. This generates a feeling of safety and belonging which is often expressed as having 'no strangers' around.

But the high degree of social capital in Hillsville can also have an oppressive quality. The feeling of constant social surveillance was expressed with rolling eyes or sighing, as every single participant announced that 'everyone knows my name here'. For some this means keeping a low profile. Claire (CS) feels 'less confident' in Hillsville than in Hobart: 'I don't know everyone there', she declares. Claire expresses the view that the socially intrusive environment of Hillsville can result in stigmatisation because of the tendency for personal affairs to become public rather than private.

Hillsville is also experienced as a place of exclusion from the excitement and entertainment opportunities of the city. Similar to young people in other rural communities, the participants spoke of 'nothing to do, nowhere to go' and their exclusion from activities such as going to the cinema or having a place to hang out after school (Wyn and Stokes 1998; White 1999). They therefore expressed an ambiguous relationship to the town, embracing its strengths, yet deriding its weaknesses.

Jonathan (CS) explains how the young people in Hillsville share a stigmatised identity caused by labelling from outsiders:

Jonathan: All the school went up there and a lot of people bagged out coming from 'Hicksville'

MS: Why did they do that?

Jonathan: Apparently we have all got bad grammar and everyone is related to each other and we're all inbred so I said: 'Have you actually ever been there?'

They hadn't so that shut them up.

But the labelling process is mutual. Justin, an ESL, explains that when you are away on holidays your friends 'might grab your mail even if you didn't ask them to so it doesn't look as if you've been away in case city people come down'. Justin conveys the idea that people outside Hillsville cannot be trusted; a view echoed by Lucas in his comment that 'in the city you wouldn't know if someone was nice or a killer'. These young people perceive their lives in Hillsville as risky because of the socially intrusive environment and their exclusion from opportunities outside the area. Yet the world beyond Hillsville is also risky because of their attachment to their hometown and processes of labelling. Their ambiguous relationship to Hillsville is explained by the contradictions created by the high social capital of their country town. This feature of rural communities is also linked to early school leaving (Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick 2001).

## **A rural habitus**

The participants also have a love of the rural landscape which is closely related to their sense of belonging to Hillsville and this helps to explain how rurality is implicated in educational choice (Fullarton et al. 2003: Jones 2002). The natural habitat surrounding Hillsville is integral to the young people's lifeworld. Peter (CS) explains his love of the local area: 'There was a creek running through it and three waterfalls. We would walk up there and go swimming and go under the waterfall. You could just lie in there while the water fell on you. It was cold! It was good on hot days'. Peter claims a relationship to the land through his experiences in the natural environment. All the young people are actively engaged with the wilderness through activities such as 'going out in the boats, hikes, play around the camp fire and tell stories' (Anthony, ESL). Life habitually lived in Hillsville is a life bound up with nature. This happens in subtle ways such as the daily ride on the school bus through the green hills or through planned activities such as bushwalking.

Feelings of exclusion from the opportunities of the city occur through the contrast between the young people's familiarity with their local area and the unfamiliar landscape of the city. Kate says she 'never get[s] lost around Hillsville' and Lucas guides me 'through the hills and then it will be flat, go up some more hills and you'll be in a forest and come out to the ocean'. Whilst the participants can *read* the rural landscape, the city assumes a maze-like character in the face of Hillsville and its environs. 'There are one way streets everywhere in Launceston', Justin warns me, 'you get lost easily'. Jill's statement that 'the city is crowded and noisy' sums up the common experience of feeling

lost and alone in the city. It becomes an overwhelming task to relate to ‘the crowd’ when one is habitually accustomed to open spaces and familiar faces. Nick tells me that in Perth ‘some people are really nasty. In Hillsville you can ask anyone to do anything and they will do it for you ‘cause you know everyone’. These stories illustrate the continuing persistence of the rural-urban divide which has previously been expressed in contrasting findings such as the city as a place of desire (White 1999) and young rural people’s dislike of city life (Quixley 1992). For these participants, identification with place is tied with identification with its people, mediated by their social relationships.

### ***Family life***

#### **Family culture**

When reviewing the cards, all the participants rated ‘my family’ as important and this reflects its centrality in their lives. However, family practices differed, with social background playing an important part (Collins, Kenway and McCleod, 2000; Marks and MacMillan 2003). The ESLs know that manual labour ‘is hard work, you get real tired and the pay is not much’ (Ben). Ben tells me that backbreaking factory work is physically exhausting, and when you come home it is nice to sit down and watch TV with the family. Most of these participants know what it is like not to be able to deal adequately with unforeseen expenses such as school trips, fuel and clothes. They deal with this situation by ‘helping out when mum is exhausted’ and they take pride in getting wood (Justin), doing the dishes (Lucas) and cooking. Listen to Jill who worries about her parent: ‘I cook tea and make sure s/he eats. I cook breakfast and sometimes I leave lunch

in the fridge. Otherwise s/he wouldn't eat. S/he would just work and work and work'.

These young people state that a good family relationship means 'helping each other out' including local extended family members. Helping each other out in practical ways, with material things such as food and furniture or socially by looking after each others' children, makes life a little easier. This interweaves with the young people's attachment to Hillsville as a place where 'everyone looks out for each other'.

The family practices in the homes of the CSs were captured in their commonly expressed statement that 'my parents love their jobs'. Claire, for example, chats to her parents over dinner about 'what happened at school, what they have done and what interesting stuff we have found out during the day'. Talking about personal interests is an important way for Claire's family to spend time together and this pattern is repeated for the other CSs. Peter's interaction with his dad is characterised by his father's engagement in his IT job. Peter loves it when his father brings some special IT parts home so he can help him figure out how to repair them. 'I'm a bit better than dad now', he confides to me. For these families, most of whom are self-employed or employed in the service sector, the line between work and leisure is indistinguishable. Both Kate and Anna jump in the tractor with their fathers after school to go off and feed the cattle, demonstrating these participants' view that a good family relationship consists of 'spending time together'. The world of work infiltrates the activities that take place in the young people's homes. Whilst the home activities of the ESLs' families are structured around home duties, the activities in the CSs' homes are characterised by leisure.



## **Family breakdown and dysfunctional families**

Family breakdown was a persistent theme for all the ESLs. Many live in step- and blended families and a common issue is ‘not getting along with my stepparent’ (Jill). Paradoxically, they also state that ‘we’re a very close family’ (Lucas) and the biological parent’s occasional ‘phone calls’ are treated trivially. Yet, their reflections on their parental relationships suggest this is not the whole story. Susan wonders “if they think about you. You think ‘I wonder if mum misses me or ‘I wonder what dad is thinking’. But I don’t ring up and say ‘hey mum, I miss you mum’, cause me and mum don’t get along that well.” For most of these young people, feelings of abandonment compete with the longing to be with the parent, creating uncertainty and emotional turmoil.

Many of these participants had or were enduring severe distress, often as a result of family breakdown. Incidents included the suicide or deaths of family members, kidnapping, physical violence, mental illness, cancer, anorexia and problems associated with substance use. Adolescence brought a critical awareness of their difficult circumstances. One participant explains:

I don’t do drugs after my relative committed suicide. I was very young, but old enough to know what happened. S/he took drugs, didn’t mean to but it made him/her ill. I knew what happened but it didn’t really hit me before I was fifteen cause I thought to myself that it wasn’t fair that s/he didn’t even get to live this long. I haven’t even done anything yet, fifteen years is nothing.

Turning 15 fosters a chain of thoughts about life, death and the future for this participant. This heightens the awareness of significant others, and it becomes the traumatic experience of losing a close relative that demands intense attention and analysis. A further source of instability for many of the ESLs is disruptive behaviours in their extended families. One participant describes how a relative is in a relationship involving domestic violence: 'We had disagreements with her 'cause she's still with him. We all told her that it works [separation] 'cause most of our family have broken up and remarried.' The reference to 'we' places this participant at the heart of the family conflict. The everyday risks of modernity become amplified for these young people, inhibiting their personal capacity to invest in things outside the family realm such as education and their futures.

### **The importance of 'knowing'**

Most of the thirteen participants are embedded in close-knit networks, but these extend beyond the confines of local space. The young people visit family members outside the area on weekends and holidays, but through their different habitus they attach different meanings to travelling out of the area:

MS: Do you see your family often?

Kate (CS): Yep, very often, we're very close. We always call in when we go away. I am used to going to Hobart, we go there in the holidays. Mum's friends live there and we try to catch up with them and go out for tea.

MS: Do you have family in other parts of Tassie?

Justin (ESL): Yeah I have an aunt and uncle in Launceston. We sometimes go up to visit them...I don't really know where they live. We don't go there much really, mainly when I go up for Tennis.

Whilst Kate conveys the idea of a strong global family network, Justin indicates a weaker network. Kate 'calls in' to see relatives, she feels comfortable in Hobart and knows her way around. Justin's trips require planning, his recollection of Launceston is hazy and it is a place of confusion rather than comfort. Nick (CS) is the only participant with no reservations about the city. He sums it up in his conclusion that 'Perth is my home away from home. I've been going there forever. I know my way around really well. I know where everything is.' These stories show how the nature of the young people's social relationships predisposes them towards certain social situations. Those with strong social capital in the form of strong links to population centres feel confident to leave the area, compared to those with weak external links. Decisions to exit or continue education are therefore interwoven with how they feel about leaving the local area.

The commonly expressed sentiment of 'knowing' the city or the country implies not merely the outsider's factual knowledge of a place, but also an insider's understandings of certain ways of life. This is achieved not only through family networks but also through the cultural capital of those networks. The cultural knowledge of the ESLs is tied to the local area. Anthony asserts that 'knowledge has been passed down through generations. That's what I've always done. That's why I love it', and he is now able to

‘handle the cattle with care, get them quiet.’ This illustrates how the cultural knowledge and practices of Anthony’s family are closely tied to the land and how this impacts on his decision to stay in the area. Practices embedded in the local area are perpetuated in recreation patterns. Jane likes ‘the holidays, I like having a barbeque with my family. We go to Seawater Beach, near the big trees’. Jane’s habitus is deeply embedded in the natural environment, and it is there she feels confident.

The CSs’ social and cultural capital is not confined to one area. Nick knows the city through his aunt’s work, but also through ‘staying out late at night and go to the cinema’ with friends and family. Nick demonstrates how he has absorbed the urban lifestyle and is accustomed to the opportunities and diversity of the city. Anna’s account highlights how the continuing students are comfortable in both rural and urban landscapes. She enjoys having ‘no one looking over the fence’ in Hillsville, yet looks forward to studying in Canberra and ‘staying with my aunt’. The CSs are ‘cultural omnivores’ (Peterson, 1992, 1997) in their ability to move between different cultural realms. This is a key factor for rural students whose choices to leave or continue their education involve geographical, social and cultural mobility (Emmison 2003).

### ***Young people and leisure***

#### **The familiar world of sport**

In common with other rural studies (Wyn, Stokes and Stafford 1998), this study found that sport is an integral part of most of the young people’s familiar worlds. The young

male ESLs identify particularly strongly with sport. Anthony 'like[s] it here. All my family is here, there's good scenery and there's the hockey ground and the footy ground'. Anthony talks about sport as integral to his geographical and social world. These young men play with their 'best mates' (Anthony), 'brothers' (Ben) and 'anyone who joins the team' (Justin). Sport reinforces their sense of inclusion and solidarity with the community.

### **The cultural hierarchy of leisure**

Sport is part of a cultural hierarchy of leisure. Nick (CS) tells me that 'the cocky kids think they are so much better than everyone else. They play football, sometimes basketball. We are the lower group because we write poetry.' Nick points to a hierarchy of taste distinguished by how leisure is consumed. He is acutely aware that the footballers perceive his cultural capital as derivative, but in comparing his poetic practices of 'playing around with words' with the practices of the footballers who 'do things I don't bother with' he identifies the footballers' cultural practices as vulgar. Whilst Nick is marginalised in this hierarchy, his social and cultural capital helps him to 'make my own fun' with people who share his interest in poetry.

The hierarchy of leisure is interlinked with the lack of leisure activities. The male ESLs share an interest in sport, but it is also these young men who most frequently declare that 'there's nothing to do, nowhere to go' in Hillsville. This is reflected in the ways they spend their time when they do not play sport. Whilst some of the male ESLs identify strongly with 'partying and drinking' (Ben), others define themselves in opposition to

such activities and refer to the people who engage in them as ‘people who drink alcohol and act like idiots’ (Justin). Rather than engaging in alcohol consumption this group of young men spend their time ‘hanging around’ or ‘kicking the footy’ in the backyard or the park. These accounts suggest that the high levels of ‘hanging around’ and alcohol consumption in Hillsville are linked to the lack of leisure activities. At the same time these activities are part of the cultural hierarchy of leisure in which some male ESLs see alcohol consumption as distasteful and set themselves apart from it by further engagement in ‘hanging around, mucking about’ (Anthony).

### **Hegemonic masculinity and exclusion**

The expression of a hegemonic masculinity limits the leisure choices of some of the young men (Connell 2005). Lucas (ESL) chooses ‘not to hang around with the popular, cocky people’ from the football community because of their practices of ‘acting literally gay...acting just like they’re having sex with each other. Real homosexual shit.’ Lucas condemns the extreme homophobia in rural areas (Emslie 1999) in his description of how the footballers ridicule gay men by mimicking them. In disapproving of the association between sport and homophobic practices, Lucas faces a double exclusion from leisure because of the lack of alternative activities. Peter (CS) also defines himself in opposition to hegemonic masculinity and says that ‘there’s a real difference between me and other guys in Hillsville who treat girls really bad’. Peter links these misogynic practices to his withdrawal from sporting activities and recent interest in IT which he practices with family members and friends. Yet the effects of this exclusion from the central leisure activity of the town are mediated by social and cultural capital. Whilst Peter uses his wide

networks and knowledge to find alternative activities, Lucas' more local knowledge and contacts make him vulnerable to risk taking behaviour such as alcohol consumption.

Jane's account suggests that the dominance of a hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) also shapes the experiences of some women ESLs. She explains:

Jane: People are just sports mad. They get angry if they don't win and you feel as if you're getting murdered and they hug the ball

MS: Are there many people like that?

Jane: Nearly all of them in Hillsville. When it comes to footy they're bad. That's why I don't like footy cause they are so bad. I don't like playing with the boys.

They get real angry, bad tempered.

The response of some of these young women to the experience of an aggressive and competitive hegemonic masculinity is to withdraw from engagement in sport. But this has its costs. Although these young women describe themselves as 'hungering' to participate in 'some cultural stuff' (Susan) and liking 'drama and singing' (Susan and Jane) opportunities are non-existent. Instead they retreat to their private space, missing school and spending time 'walking up the street and back' (Susan) or 'just sit in my bedroom and watch TV' (Jane) or otherwise 'hanging around' (Jill). The already risky lives of these young women in terms of their disadvantaged and disrupted backgrounds are exacerbated by their exclusion from sport, and the absence of alternative leisure activities results in social isolation and withdrawal from the community.

The accounts of the CSs were quite different, especially the young women. They experience Hillsville as a place where there *is* ‘plenty to do’ (Kate). On most days they play netball, hockey or dance, with their parents taking turns to drive them to their activities. Kate talks about ‘sleepovers at my friends’ places’, Anna about going to the city with ‘mum and my friends at least once a week’ and Claire about ‘spending time with my friends in Launceston in the holidays’. At home they are familiar with or enjoy activities such as reading, playing the piano or singing. Whilst these girls identify with the area through their participation in sport, their habitus extends to cultural activities beyond Hillsville. This allows them to escape processes of marginalisation that the young people who are most embedded in the community are at risk of experiencing.

## ***Education***

### **The value of education**

The findings of other qualitative studies that ESLs are alienated from schooling are at odds with this study’s findings (Alloway et al. 2003; Brown et al. 2001). Almost all the participants chose the ‘staying in education and gaining qualifications’ card, and this reflected their views that education allows you to have a good career. This was defined as ‘a good job’, ‘something you enjoy’ and ‘good pay’ and contrasted with ‘a job’ in unskilled manual labour which may pay well, but is not perceived as enjoyable. The participants agreed that a good career is one you enjoy.



Whilst the participants recognise the value of education for their future careers, there are differences in their relationships to the institutionalised cultural capital stored in schools. Ben (ESL) explains he does not want to be a lawyer so he would rather ‘be out there learning as you are going’. Nick (CS) thinks the complete opposite. For him ‘it’s all just there. Anything is there if you want to have a go at it. That’s the best thing about school’. These comments suggest that different cultural knowledge and practices are categorised as learning. The ESLs interpret learning as practical and physical. They value subjects such as math, cooking, sport and health because they offer ‘life skills’ in contrast to ‘unnecessary’ subjects such as arts, ancient civilisations and music. This ‘is not something you have to learn. You can do that at home’, Lucas suggests. Many of the CSs had difficulties choosing their option subjects because the school offered such ‘a wide range of stuff’ (Kate) and most of them chose something ‘different and interesting’ (Claire). Unlike the ESLs they qualify all school subjects as learning.

### **The role of teachers**

Some ESLs describe feeling stigmatised at school, suggesting there is some relevance to Bourdieu’s (1990) argument that teachers are a source of middle class cultural capital. For Susan teachers are authority figures who ‘always single me out’ and yell ‘Susan don’t do this, Susan don’t do that’. Lucas feels the same way and confesses to ‘swearing sometimes. I don’t mean to, it just comes out. I feel bad for it. When you are around your mates you just get used to it and when you’re not you forget when it’s the right time and when it’s not’. Whilst Lucas strives to adopt the cultural practices advocated by teachers, he also gets ‘into trouble’ through his different practices. The difficulty of some

participants to adopt new cultural patterns is expressed by Jill who has ‘slowly learnt how to be able to talk to people’ during her time in high school. Susan, Lucas and Jill convey their sense that teachers are distant authority figures. However, most of the male ESLs also recognise that ‘teachers are fine if people just want to learn’ (Lucas and Justin), suggesting that factors outside the school environment also influence choices to leave school early. Indeed, reasons for not enjoying a subject include ‘I can’t concentrate’ (Jane), ‘I can’t read properly, my eyes go all blurry’ (Jill) and ‘my parents were breaking up’ (Lucas), indicating that previous achievement, emotional turmoil and health problems influence early school leaving.

The CSs think of teachers as friends who offer advice. Nick encapsulates this point in his comment that ‘all teachers have a positive attitude. You spend time with them and get to know them. They become pretty much your friends. So teachers have a positive attitude and you develop one over time too’. Nick’s account suggests his habitus intersects positively with the school environment, encouraging him to pursue education beyond Grade 10. These stories lend support to Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus as a key to understanding educational success and failure because of the role of middle class teachers in conveying a particular form of cultural capital.

## ***Transition choices***

### **Developing personal autonomy**

For all the young people the development of personal autonomy was an important theme. For the ESLs this is achieved through ‘getting a job and earning money’. Ben says that ‘it’s good to earn money so you are not always in financial trouble’. Jane is looking forward to contributing to her household by ‘paying to board with mum’ and Jill wants to be able to buy ‘food and fuel’ to share with her family. For the ESLs gaining independence involves contributing financially to their households.

Getting a job and earning money is also associated with establishing a family. Susan wants ‘to have just one kid so it can be spoilt’. For Susan, the desire to have a child of her own seems to be linked to the lack of leisure activities and her marginalised status in the community. Anthony’s reasons for wanting a family are more practical in that ‘you gotta have someone to care for and someone to have children with so they can help out with the farm’. In both cases establishing a family is a means of establishing autonomy. For these participants economic security and a stable family life are a high priority and the safest way to achieve this is through local social capital.

Most of the CSs also rated ‘getting a job and earning money’ as important. But rather than an immediate priority, they want to establish autonomy through accumulating cultural capital for their future careers. Their plans are supported by their strong family networks. Nick ‘can always come back and work and then try again’ and Anna’s aunt in

Canberra ‘would help me out’. Whilst there is a strong link between extended family and local ties for the ESLs, the CSs’ extended families assist them to move out of the area.

### **Distance to college**

Other rural studies have found that distance to the nearest College impact on early school leaving (Quixley 1992; Looker and Dwyer 1998), but in this study the effect of distance is confined to the ESLs. Furthermore, the key issue is the lack of local employment opportunities after College rather than the prospect of a long bus trip. Susan wants to become a journalist, but thinks that ‘I might just get a little job because there is no way I want go to Hobart or Launceston’. Susan’s terminology implies that she is well aware of the implications of her career choice, yet she still makes that choice. This relates less to physical distance than to Susan’s sense that these regional centres are alien places out of her reach. Jane’s recollection of her introduction to the nearest College as “so big - I got a bit lost...it was like WOW” illustrates how physical distance and social disposition intersect to alienate some young rural people from the city. For these participants whose lives are already disadvantaged on so many dimensions, seeking employment in the local community appears to be less risky than investing in education which will place them in unfamiliar settings and may not even result in a job.

### **Individualised career choices**

The development of personal autonomy is closely associated with individualised career choices. Most of the CSs locate their career choices within that of their family. Kate

wants to become a nurse because “my aunty is a nurse. She’s so good with little kids and mum is always like: ‘that’s what you’re like with them’” and Nick talks about ‘my aunty who is a police officer and my uncle is an engineer’. These reference points co-exist with a strong sense of self-direction reflected in statements about ‘being me’ (Kate) and ‘being different’ (Nick). Claire is the only CS from a manual background and she seeks to be ‘different’ through gaining qualifications and having a career she ‘actually likes’. This is achieved through her access to social networks with varied cultural practices such as her local friends who have babies, and her friend in Hobart who wants to ‘be a chef and another who wants to work with disabled children’. Claire is culturally omnivorous (Peterson 1997) and this allows her to choose her position in the cultural landscape (Emmison 2003). The CSs experience their decisions to continue their education as individualised and positive.

The ESLs also feel they are making individualised career choices. Anthony asks me why he should leave the area when it ‘has pretty much everything we need: grocery shops and good farming areas’. Whilst Anthony has internalised the cultural practices of his social networks, his choice is also a reflexive one. He can tell me all the advantages and disadvantages of staying on at school, but is certain that leaving is right for him.

Unlike the CSs, the ESLs (with the exception of Anthony) want to achieve difference from their families. Ben certainly does not ‘want to be like my stepdad, a factory worker. It would be boring, struggling all the time financially’. Yet he plans to take up manual labour after Grade 10. Ben’s sense of freedom to make this choice interweaves with the

precarious feeling that this is not really what he wants and he deals with this by planning to 'look for an apprenticeship'. Confusion and uncertainty also characterise Lucas' choice to take 'some time out' before deciding what to do. Lucas' 'dad dropped out of Grade 9 to work 'cause he had to. He kept on telling me to get qualified and I got sick of it and I was like "the more you tell me that, Dad, I don't want to do it. Just because you didn't do it...I want to do what I want to do"'. Lucas seems aware that he is making a choice that sets him up for disadvantage, yet the factors leading to this choice have been established long before it had to be made.

These young people are actively engaged in the project of the self (Giddens 1991), but their choices are also shaped by their access to social and cultural capital. Whilst the ESLs state that 'my parents just want to see me happy', many of the CSs' parents 'would pay accommodation for me' (Nick) or 'try to get me into a private school' (Anna). These accounts demonstrate how the CSs' parents actively draw on their access to social, cultural and economic capital to make the arrangements which support the choices of their children. These accounts support Devine's (2005) findings of the active role played by parents in guiding and facilitating their children's choices.

## **Chapter Four: Summary and Conclusion**

The young people in this study all understood the value of education to their future careers. Yet while they shared the same physical space their social worlds were distinct. Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus facilitate a contextual approach to understanding how these worlds shaped the educational choices of the thirteen young people in this study.

Access to, and internalisation of, different cultural knowledge and practices is facilitated by family practices such as home activities, recreation and holiday patterns. The nature of the young people's social and cultural capital becomes a crucial factor in educational choice because in rural areas these decisions are tied with the choice to leave or stay in the region. For the ESLs the decision to continue their education is risky because family and community networks and knowledge are tied to the local area. For the CSs this risk is minimised because they have internalised the cultural knowledge and practices of the city.

The finding that distance to the nearest college is implicated in early school leaving (Quixley 1992; Wierenga 2001) is qualified in this study by an understanding that the barrier is not merely physical distance, but fear of being a stranger in foreign land. Familiarity with the city is not facilitated by social capital alone, for example the occasional visit to a relative or a school, but rather through 'knowing' the culture of the city via the cultural capital attached to social networks. Whilst the ESLs experience the lifestyle of the city as a violation of their rural habitus, the social dispositions of the CSs

suggest that they are cultural omnivores (Peterson 1992, 1997) at home in both city and country. The CSs' ability to choose their position in the cultural landscape supports Emmison's (2005) argument about the link between cultural omnivores and high cultural mobility. Although it is not possible to generalise, this finding suggests that rurality operates as an independent variable in choices to leave school early.

Cultural differences become pronounced in the school context. Whilst qualitative studies have identified issues such as 'not getting along with teachers' and 'not liking school' as factors influencing early school leaving (Brown et al. 2001; Smyth et al. 2000), the concept of the habitus allows a deeper understanding of these issues. Whilst the CSs are encouraged to pursue education beyond Year 10 through their positive interaction with the school environment, the ESLs are discouraged from further engagement in education because they have internalised cultural practices and knowledge that 'get me into trouble'. This is despite the fact that they acknowledge the critical role of education in having 'a good career'. This finding contradicts other studies which argue the value of education is not obvious to some rural families (Kenyon et al. 2001). Whilst the CSs and the ESLs have the same aspirations, whether and how they fulfil these is mediated by their habitus. The significance of the role played by social and cultural capital in shaping educational choice is particularly demonstrated by Claire, the only CS from a manual background. It is her extensive social networks and the associated cultural capital which allows her to be culturally and physically mobile.



The close correlation between social background and school retention in this study confirms the well established link between early school leaving and disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also evidence previous achievement is a factor influencing early school leaving (Collins, Kenway & McCleod 2000; Fullarton et al. 2003). Most of the ESLs come from low-income backgrounds and their desire to leave school is associated with the establishment of financial and emotional stability through employment and a family of their own. Although the link between disrupted family background and early school leaving is not well established in the retention literature (Brooks et al 1997), this was a striking feature of the sample, suggesting that the ESLs' distressing experiences limit their capacity to invest in education and their futures.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that the parents' investment in their offspring differs in terms of care and support, it does differ in terms of social, cultural and economic resources. Social disposition and economic and social disadvantage intersect with rurality to produce limited engagement in mainstream community activities, disengagement from schooling and choices to leave school early. Whilst the problem of the lack of leisure activities in rural areas is recognised in the literature (Wyn et al. 1998; White 1999), this study suggests its effects are most keenly felt by those who experience the greatest social and emotional disadvantage. For these young people whose social and cultural capital is tied to the local area and who are not interested in sport the only alternatives are 'hanging around' and/or alcohol consumption. This exclusion is associated with social isolation and withdrawal from the community, thereby compounding their disadvantage.

Whilst all the participants desire to write their own biographies, this takes place in the shadow of that of their parents. For the CSs this is associated with feeling positive about their choices to continue education and optimism this will result in ‘a good career’. The ESLs’ stories are more ambiguous. Whilst consciously choosing to leave school early, they attach mixed feelings to this choice, associating it with disadvantage and the hope of future re-entry into the education system.

Whilst the close link between educational choice and social background is well known, the clear-cut nature of it in this small sample was unexpected. Yet this needs to be qualified with the observation that Anthony sees early school leaving as a positive choice and Claire makes the choice to continue her education despite her manual background.

### ***Limitations and areas of further research***

There were a number of limitations to this study. The finding of the link between class and educational choice cannot be generalised because of the small size of this sample and the possibility that the sample is biased. The cross-sectional analysis is also a limitation as the ESLs’ future careers are not known.

A further limitation was the researcher’s role as a part-time teacher at the School which may have influenced the issues some participants were prepared to discuss. Using self-selected sampling limited this risk by ensuring that only students who felt comfortable in this situation were recruited. Presenting the topic of early school leaving through a hypothetical scenario further limited this risk.

Whilst the use of the cards was an excellent opening technique for the interview, they were less valuable as a data source because they provided no insight into how the students interpreted their choices. For example, many CSs did not select ‘having a good career’ because they assumed it was implicit in ‘staying in education and gaining qualifications’. For this reason the analysis has focused on the interviews rather than the findings from the cards.

Another limitation was the limited attention paid to the values and expectations of the School and teachers. The timeframe of this project and rigid space requirements made this unrealistic.

Further, to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality some findings and relevant information were left out of this report. For example, it was not possible to include a profile of each participant or to describe Hillsville in detail.

Areas of further research include whether or not choices to leave school early do lead to weak labour market opportunities as the literature suggests, and at what points and in what circumstances ESLs re-enter the education system. There is also a need for more extensive research on factors outside the school that lead to early school leaving, including how extended family members influence educational choices.

### ***Policy implications***

Whilst not generalisable, the findings of this study have implications for strategies to improve school retention. They suggest that where social and cultural capital is closely tied to the local area, uncertainty about city living is implicated in choices to leave school early. Strategies such as ‘adoption’ based programs could be used to bridge the rural-urban divide. For example, interested students and their families could ‘adopt’ a family from the city to introduce them to the opportunities and lifestyle of the city.

The disturbing finding that early school leaving is associated with high levels of disengagement, alienation and withdrawal from the community and education suggests a need to re-engage these young people through a non-school context. Hillsville’s young people desperately need opportunities for leisure activities other than sport and a space of their own to spend time after school.

This study has used Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital to show how young people’s access to resources shape every aspect of their lives. Family practices, opportunities for leisure and relationships to community and nature intersect through the habitus to create a sense of place in the world. These economic, social and cultural dispositions interact positively or negatively with the school environment, encouraging or discouraging young people to pursue further education. This study concludes that whilst exiting the education system may be a positive choice for some ESLs, most of the ESLs in this sample make the choice to leave school early with the feeling that they are setting

themselves up for disadvantage. The sense of unfulfilled potential is conveyed by Jane, an ESL:

I guess we just need something to discover our dreams and talents. We don't have soccer here. Someone could be the best ever soccer champion. They would never know 'cause they've never tried. They will never know their talents 'cause they have nothing here to discover and no one to show.

Yet the findings of this study also suggest that supporting these young people to develop their knowledge of, and ties to, the city would encourage the cultural and geographical mobility essential for their future.

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## Appendix

### *Ratings of Cards in Order of Importance*

Table two: Ratings of Cards in Order of Importance by Career Choice and Gender (N=13)

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Early School Leavers</b>			<b>Continuing Students</b>		
<b>Card</b>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total</i>
My family	4	3	7	3	3	6
Staying in education and gaining qualifications	3	3	6	3	2	5
Getting a job and earning money	3	3	6	3	2	5
Having a good career	3	3	6	1	2	3
Staying in my local area	1	0	1	1	1	2
Going to another town/city	0	0	0	1	1	2
Getting married	1	0	1	0	0	0
Having children	1	0	1	0	1	1