Career decision making in a rural school

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This research focuses on the complexity of career decision making in rural school-leavers. Whilst there has been research conducted on graduate career choice and identity in island communities in Scotland, there is little research on rural school-leaver career choices in mainland Scotland. This qualitative project aimed to contribute to the knowledge base in relation to career decision making in rural school-leavers. Participants were interviewed about their post-school plans and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Themes of 'proximity', 'perceptions of home location', 'support network' and 'personal agency' were found to influence the career decisions of the pupils. It was found that whilst home location influenced the pupils' decisions, this combined with personal agency and socio-economic factors.

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Introduction

Dumfries and Galloway is the third largest local authority by land mass in Scotland. Key industries in Dumfries and Galloway include forestry and farming (SDS, 2017), occupations that are often located in the most remote parts of the region out with public transport links. Public transport in remote, rural areas can be limited and expensive, and within Dumfries and Galloway 22% of households do not have access to private transport (Health Intelligence Unit, 2015). Therefore, many school-leavers of secondary schools in Dumfries and Galloway face geographical challenges in accessing further and higher education, jobs and training. The low frequency of public transport means that school-leavers relying on it may face protracted commutes due to waiting times or find they cannot access an opportunity due to time-tabling logistics. For others, the opportunities to pursue their chosen career may not be possible within the region and

therefore requires a substantial commute or in some cases moving away from the area. This adds a different dimension to the career decision making process or requires an alignment to available local opportunities. Therefore, this project looks to explore the influences in the career decisions of school-leavers in a rural area.

Career decisions in rural areas

There is growing body of international research on career decision making in rural communities. Corbett's (1997) study of schooling in a coastal community in Nova Scotia highlights the complexity of 'success' in a rural community. Corbett (1997) discusses Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which describes the connections between individuals such as between families and communities and how those connections are used (Fields, 2017). Whilst some individuals develop academic connections through school and move away, the strong community and traditions associated with fishing, means that many pupils stay to join the family fishing business. Corbett (1997) explains how these choices compete, and that it can be based on these forms of capital that the individual makes their choices. More recently, Bårdsdatter Bakke (2018) describes the themes of 'context' and 'competence' in the career decision making of pupils in rural Norway in relation to their choice to 'stay or go'. Bårdsdatter Bakke (2018) highlights that the complexity of the career decisions faced by pupils links with the strong sense of community in the area.

Alexander (2013, 2015a, 2015b) focuses on graduate identity in rural island communities. Alexander (2013) highlights that in rural island communities, compromise accompanied by a degree of luck is a key to career success; that career planning can be challenging due to limited opportunities; and the 'hidden jobs' market is where many opportunities

exist. That is, to gain employment the graduate needs to build connections and identify with the sense of community. This compromise could include an initial move to the mainland first or taking a different role. Alexander (2016) focuses on the impact of socio-cultural factors on the career decision-making process of higher education students from Orkney and Shetland. Her findings demonstrate that proximity was an important factor and whilst 'island habitus' was important in the decision-making process and could provide structure it did not '*determine individual choice*' (Alexander, 2016, p188). Alexander (2018) argues that despite globalisation and new technologies there is not an even spread of opportunities; there are areas of poverty and national and local variations in the number and types of career opportunities available. Recent commentary suggests that the geographic mobility of graduates is over-estimated (Ball, 2017). Ball's (2017) analysis of data demonstrates a trend that it is the minority of university students who move away from their home region to study and later move again to work. Alexander (2018) discusses the issue of 'spatial justice' arguing that increased mobility is not the answer to reducing 'spatial injustice'. This perspective details the complex interaction of geographical and social space and the way they are constructed. This combines to influence the lived experiences of the individuals who inhabit them.

Whilst one of the decisions for those living in rural areas may be to 'stay' or 'go' this does not exclude other influences. The influence of family, socio-economic background, aspirations and education in young people is well researched (Flouri & Panourgia, 2012; Elsley 2014; Oomen, 2018). A report by the New South Wales Government (2014) in Australia comments on the importance of parental relationships in terms of career development in their children through raising aspirations. Elsley's (2014) report on young people's views of poverty and education in Scotland documents that education and home are perceived as the top factors determining success in life. Shucksmith's (2004) literature review on social exclusion of young people in rural areas discusses the vicious circle that young people from a working-class background can find themselves: that a car is needed to access a job, but a job is needed to pay for a car. This research aligns with traditional structural theory. Ken Roberts' (1968) early theory asserts that an

individual's ambitions and career are largely determined by the interplay of 'opportunity structures' such as education, local labour market, class and gender. More recently, Roberts (2009) discusses how opportunities structures have changed; such as the structure of employment, with most jobs now being non-manual. Roberts (1997) argues that whilst individuals can make choices with regards to their career these choices do not provide the whole picture and still operate within a structure. In contrast, social cognitive career theory (Lent & Brown; 1996; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994; Lent & Hackett, 1987) gives a more prominent role to personal agency. Lent et al. (1994) assert that an individual's 'self efficacy' interacts with 'outcome expectations' and 'goals' and it is this that determines whether a behaviour is initiated or not.

The existing body of research highlights the complexity of career decision making, however there is limited research on Scottish rural school leavers' career decisions and the influences on these decisions. Therefore, the primary question for the study was: What factors contribute to career decisions in pupils from a rural school and how do they influence those career decisions?

Method

To answer the primary question a data-rich narrative was required. The project took a qualitative approach, which allowed for an exploration of motivations. Six upcoming school leavers were interviewed on their post-school plans and how they had made these decisions in the context of their rural location. Four participants had an intended destination of college and two of university. Four participants were female and two were male and all participants were between 16 and 18 years of age. No participant was looking to go straight into employment. The small sample size means generalisations cannot be made.

Information on parental/guardian occupation was gathered and classified using the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Occupational Grouping Hierarchy using their online occupational coding tool (ONS, 2018). Where both parents worked, the highest occupational category was used. The hierarchy runs from major group one: managers, directors and senior officials to nine: elementary occupations.

Thematic analysis was the chosen approach for data analysis. The interviews were transcribed, and then relevant extracts were coded. Data was coded according to intra and inter-interview prevalence (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Rance, 2014). Thematic analysis demonstrated four key themes of 'proximity', 'perceptions of home location', 'support network' and 'personal agency'. These combined to explain the influences in the subject area, destination type and destination location the pupil chose. The participant quotes have been anonymised and the local dialect has been preserved.

Themes explained

When assessing the components to career choice required by the pupil there were three main elements to this decision. These are described in Table 1 to provide clarity of terminology in discussion.

Table 1: Career choice components

Component to Decision	Illustrative Example
Industry or subject area (What)	Work with animals, MA (Hons) Geography
Destination Type (How)	University, College, Modern Apprenticeship (M.A.)
Destination Location (Where)	Home location, Glasgow, London

Proximity

Proximity was an influence when considering the destination type and the destination location. That is, a decision was made as to whether to pursue an opportunity based on its distance from home. Of the four pupils going to college, two spoke of this being a second-choice option. The first pupil spoke of the available apprenticeship opportunities in their chosen area being too far from home;

> 'Like I say if it was Manchester or somewhere, I could come back and see my family but coming back from Portsmouth…well…it's not really ideal to be honest…'

The second pupil discussed a strong desire to move away from the area but viewed this as 'unrealistic' or a longer-term plan.

> 'No straight away no. I think I need to be realistic about it. I'd say maybe three years…'

No pupil had disregarded university due to proximity. Only the two pupils going to university had a definite plan to leave home. This was partly due to the limited availability of degree level programs within the region and partly as the two pupils going to university viewed moving away as the 'status quo'. Both pupils perceived distance to family as being the main factor in the choice of university as this provided them with the ability to return home easily.

> 'I just I didnae [didn't] fancy it. I didnae fancy going any further. I didnae look into the uni's further... I didn't even give Dundee or anything like that a second thought…'

In both cases, destination type was the initial decision, followed by subject choice, then, location of destination type then finally university availability within this prescribed area.

Perceptions of the area

There were mixed perceptions of the area. Whilst the positive and negative perceptions of the area acted as an influence in the pupils' long-term career plans, it was the perception of opportunities locally that pupils spoke of as having the biggest influence on their initial plans.

The pupils who spoke most positively about the area were the two going to university with plans to move away. The four pupils who were not planning to leave had mixed views on the area; they acknowledged the sense of community but found the available opportunities limiting. Two of these pupils had considered moving away longer-term, whilst two had not considered moving.

Four of the pupils talked of the support and inclusion that being part of this community provided. They viewed this as unique to rural areas.

> 'I love living in [this village]…if something happens everyone pulls together everyone supports one another and…if it's anywhere bigger it's going to be different…it's just because everyone kens [knows] one another asking for one another everyone cares…'

The two pupils moving away (for university) spoke of a desire to return to the area but there was a split in whether they viewed this as a realistic goal or not:

> 'I definitely will no be [here]. I doubt it. Whether I'll still be in [this city] I don't know…there isn't many labs that's to do with forensics or the police…It's London and that I may be there. I just don't know where I'm going to end up.'

> 'Maybe I'll end up taking to the city and stay in the city but I'm pretty sure I'll end up coming back up this way…'

Two of the pupils, planning on going to college, described boredom and a desire to move away.

> 'Not really much to do really, anything to keep me if I'm honest. There's not much work…'

Factory-work dominated pupils' view of potential employment in the area. This was partly because it is one of the largest employers in the immediate area, providing both permanent and seasonal work, but also because of its accessibility by walking or public transport. Whilst pupils spoke positively of the strong community links, in contrast, gaining employment at the factory was described in a negative context. For all six pupils it acted as catalyst to continue beyond statutory education to build qualification levels.

> 'Because the only thing here are factories and I decided quite early on that I didn't want to be stuck in a factory for ever. I don't think I could get a good job there.'

Support network

All pupils spoke of discussing their career ideas with parents/guardians and extended family, friends and teachers. There was only one case of these discussions not being positive and supportive. Immediate family was a big influence in career decision. This influence was largely in a supportive capacity and acted to affirm the pupils' choices.

> 'I think they are quite happy with my decisions because I'm showing that I want to do something, that I don't really want to be stuck doing nothing'

One pupil spoke of the necessity of learning to drive as they were accessing a college out with the region, which had no direct route with public transport;

> 'I'll have to save up and buy a car because obviously without driving its pretty basically impossible to get to [the college]…even though it's not that far.'

A dichotomy existed between the pupils that were planning to learn to drive and would have access to private transport and those that would be reliant on public transport. The three pupils from families in higher-occupational groupings had a definite plan to drive. The three pupils from lower-occupational background had no plans to learn to drive. Whilst the financial implication of learning to drive was not directly discussed, this implies the existence of a financial barrier for pupils from a lower-occupational background.

Personal agency

Personal agency as described by Lent et al. (1996) was the biggest influence on the subject area, destination type and level the pupil chose to study at. Four of the pupils cited their preferences as taking precedence over other influencing factors.

> 'Most of my career decisions have been my own choice. It's just through seeing things in everyday life.'

One pupil described growing self-efficacy as exam results provided evidence of their ability:

> 'I took physics…then I dropped it and thought I can't do this I'm not good enough…and I really wish I'd stuck at it, persevered because I felt the same about everything – I'm no good at this I'm no clever enough and I ended up doing really well…'

All six pupils spoke of childhood aspiration and/or enjoyment of the subject area as the main factor behind their choice of career and aligning these aspirations with careers they viewed as available.

> 'I've always had an eye for engineering…When I was younger I would always play about with things…build things…fix things…so I kinda knew I always wanted to do engineering…'

Discussion

This research provides evidence for the impact of the pupils' location combining with personal agency in the shaping of their career decisions. Throughout the interviews there was clear evidence of geographical structures influencing the career decision making process. Alexander (2016) highlights the importance of proximity to some island graduates and this project has found this to be a key determinant for the two pupils accessing university education. Whilst those pupils were moving out with the region, their choice to pick universities close to home links with wider graduate trends (Ball, 2017).

This concept of proximity extended to the pupil who had chosen not to pursue an apprenticeship as the location of these opportunities would have meant a move away from home. This ties in with Alexander's (2018) discussion on the imbalance in the geographic spread of opportunities. Furthermore, Shucksmith (2004) discusses that local rural labour markets often offer fewer rewarding opportunities than national labour markets. The pupil spoke of the difficulties of returning to family if they moved away. This lends support to Roberts (2009) that even in the 21st century structural factors have a continuing relevance in career decision and that not all opportunities are available to all.

In addition, Shucksmith (2004) discusses how access to private transport can play a key role in the access of opportunities. This ties in with the concept of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Fields, 2017). This divide in accessibility to opportunities has several dimensions. It could be viewed as a rural issue affecting all pupils living rurally compared to pupils in an urban area with better public transport links. The three pupils from lower occupational backgrounds had no plans to learn to drive, so this divide narrows to those who have the resources to learn to drive and those who do not. Then finally, there is a divide in accessible opportunities for those leaving school at their statutory leaving date in rural schools, who are unable to drive until they reach their seventeenth birthday. The three pupils learning to drive were from higher-occupational backgrounds and two had plans to move away from the area. Therefore, this suggests that the three pupils from lower-occupational backgrounds are

doubly deprived as they are the ones who most need to learn to drive to access opportunities but are less likely to have the resources to do it.

Four pupils viewed their agency as the primary influence in their career decisions whilst acknowledging the influence of area in which they lived. Alexander (2016) finds that students have agency, but this is not independent of their environment. Pupils' aversion to working in the local factory examples how a pupil's environment interacts with their personal agency. In this case the pupils spoke of making an active choice to continue with their education; however, this was influenced in part by the limited number of opportunities in the local area, epitomised by the factory.

All pupils spoke of choosing their subject/industry area based on childhood ambitions. Three of the pupils spoke of needing to align these childhood ambitions with career paths they viewed as available to them in terms of their perceived abilities and/or available opportunities. Once again, it evidences the link between personal agency, that is pursuing their chosen industry area, with environmental and socio-cultural factors. For two pupils this meant altering the destination type and for one pupil this meant choosing a course in a related area. Alexander (2013) talks about the role of compromise for graduates accessing opportunities in island communities and this aspect of compromise is evident in these pupils' decisions. This demonstrates that personal agency does not provide a full explanation of the pupils' career decision, however, this determination to pursue a long-held ambition suggests that for these pupils their ambitions are strongly held and not easily disregarded.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale study, scratching the surface of the complexity of career decisions facing rural pupils. There was an interaction between the personal agency a pupil had and the geographical and social structures that the pupil operated within. Some of the influences will be unique to this area whilst others have been echoed in other studies. Although pupils spoke about the different influences and challenges surrounding their career decisions, the pupils ultimately viewed themselves as active agents in their careers.

Further research on rural school leavers would continue to build this growing knowledge base. A limitation of this study is that the only destinations pupils were seeking were further and higher education. A future study that analysed the decisions of pupils considering a wider range of destinations and industry areas would provide a fuller picture of the varying influences on career decision. A longitudinal study would provide information on how plans made when leaving school match with a pupil's actual career path. This would give a detailed narrative on the realities of a career, and whether, the influences evolve and change in salience at different points in a pupil's career. In addition, replication of the study in urban and other rural areas would provide a comparative study and tease out which influences are unique to a rural context. Replication would also provide a broader knowledge base on the differences between pupils' mobility; specifically, the differences between those who can move but do not want to, and those who stay, but want to move.

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