

Children, Young People and Social Inclusion: Mobilising to Address Disadvantage on the NSW North Coast: a Literature Review

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Introduction

This review examines the literature in the context of a research project that sets out to investigate reasons for social inclusion and exclusion among children and young people in regional, rural and remote locations within the North Coast area of New South Wales, Australia. The review explores factors such as social and cultural capital, socio-economic status, rurality, educational aspirations, gender, cultural identity, school and neighbourhood effects and the role of technology. Literature around the theory and methods of involving children and young people in research is also reviewed.

Definitions

The term 'social exclusion' first entered the sociological literature in the mid-1970s, although earlier Weberian sociological notions of 'privilege' circled around this theme. Levitas (1996) has also drawn parallels between social exclusion and Durkheimian notions of social division, social cohesion, and the maintenance of these through the division of labour. Yet despite the passing of considerable time since the development of these early sociological perspectives, Commins (2004, p.60) describes our understanding of social exclusion as "still rudimentary", and Hoffmann-Ekstein et al (2008, p.2) as "complex and contested". There are thus many viewpoints in the literature as to what constitutes social exclusion, and even more variation as to what is necessary in order to ameliorate social exclusion in a policy setting, both nationally and internationally.

Commins (2004, p.60) reveals that the term social exclusion and the processes it embodies have enabled us to understand the multi-dimensional nature of disadvantage. The conceptualisation of social exclusion has assisted analysis of the "dynamic processes by which conditions of disadvantage come about...in wider economic and social contexts"(ibid.), as opposed to the application of a static set of indicators such as income poverty measures.

Social inclusion is generally taken to mean having access to the social and economic resources that are necessary for personal growth, well-being, health and functionality. Social exclusion on the other hand denotes exclusion from some or all of these facets, and most importantly is generally taken to have arisen not through the conscious actions of individuals or groups, but rather as a result of lack of access to all forms of capital: economic; social and cultural.

Saunders (2000, p.7) contends that social exclusion is "broader than poverty, embracing the issues of process, the denial of rights and lack of participation". He argues that experiences of social exclusion can be based on a number of social divisions such as gender, race, ethnicity and location, in addition to more traditional indicators of poverty such as income. Vinson et al (2009, p. vii) in their compendium of social inclusion indicators comparing measures in Europe and Australia state that using income as the sole measurement of social exclusion risks not taking into account factors that affect quality of life.

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In their research into social exclusion and rural and remote young people in NSW Alston and Kent (2009, p.103) draw on Reimer's framework (2004) to analyse their findings in a social exclusion/inclusion context. This framework consists of bureaucratic, market, associative and communal elements. They concluded that the "systems failure" in terms of market and bureaucratic elements was creating stresses on and eroding the capacity of individuals and communities to develop and maintain resilience across associative and communal relations.

Arguing for a distinction between social exclusion and poverty Saunders (2007, p.8) describes three dimensions of social exclusion: disengagement (lack of participation), services exclusion (lack of access to key services), and economic exclusion (lack of access to economic resources).

Prout et al (2006, p.93) when discussing research agendas around social exclusion and children's participation, contend that developing an understanding of the resources that children need in order to be able to participate is a crucial element of any such research agenda. Prout argues that fruitful directions for future research involve investigating the role of resources such as money, time, skills, and confidence, and the interplay between these in the context of participation. Studying participation through a social exclusion lens requires a focus "on what people do not do, rather than what they cannot afford. It is this feature of exclusion that distinguishes it from deprivation and from conventional approaches to poverty" (Saunders, 2008, p.14).

Finding a non-contested definition of social exclusion is thus clearly not a simple matter, and such contestation also flows over into methodological choices.

Traditionally, dimensions of social exclusion have been held to be either of primarily socio-economic and/or geographic origin. Indeed it was the Vinson Report (2007) that tied these two dimensions together so unequivocally. However it is wise to use the term socio-economic status cautiously as CHSE (2000, p.6) warn: "socio-economic status is an abstract concept for which there is no agreed international definition. The concept of socio-economic status embodies differences in social, cultural and economic factors related to class differences".

Alloway et al (2004, p.27) in their study on students' aspirations in regional Australia struggled to find what they considered a 'convincing definition of rurality'. They concluded that Western et al (1998) offered a useful approach, arguing that definitions of rurality that take into account postcodes, distances and access but which also incorporate political economy models such as socio-economic status are likely to be the most useful.

Although traditional statistical indices of 'rural' and 'remote' may be of limited application in an urbanised coastal region such as the NSW North Coast, this does not mean however that "subjective experiences of isolation" (Alston and Kent, 2009, p.91) cannot be recorded.

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Participation in education

In Australia it has been estimated that people from low SES backgrounds “are about one-third as likely as people from high SES backgrounds to participate in higher education” (CSHE, 2008, p.2).

The proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds enrolled in Australian universities has remained, on average, at around 15% since 1989, yet this group represents 25% of the population as a whole (Australian Government, 2009, p.12). A recent federal government higher education policy initiative¹ included the announcement of a target university participation rate by low SES students of 20% by 2020. The major barriers to participation by this group of people were postulated as:

....previous educational attainment, low awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education resulting in little aspiration to participate, and the need for financial assistance, academic and personal support once enrolled (Australian Government, 2009, p.13)

This is not to infer that to *not* go to university constitutes of and in itself a measure of social exclusion. Social exclusion is a relational concept and a complex, multi-layered process in terms of how it plays out in people’s lives. It cannot be measured by one or more static factors such as whether or not an individual went to university. Indeed, social exclusion cannot be ‘measured’ at all.

The choice to go, or not go to university remains a valid one, as James (2001, p.471) notes. Some young people may consciously choose not to go on to further education because they wish to remain in the area they live and/or are able to find suitable employment that does not require a university education.

However, for many young people, especially those from low SES backgrounds significant barriers exist, resulting in low participation rates in higher education. This concern was recently articulated in a study into ‘Participation and Equity’ by the University of Melbourne’s Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE, 2008):

Internationally, policy makers are concerned about the low rates of higher education participation for people from lower social class backgrounds, minority groups and disadvantaged regions and communities. This concern stems not only from the recognition that higher education confers significant individual benefits in terms of personal development, social status, career possibilities and lifetime earnings....(p. 1/2)

Thus to be excluded from higher education is to be excluded from many aspects of economic, social and cultural capital.

CSHE (2008, p.3) conducted extensive research into the reasons for the persistently low participation rates in higher education by young people from low SES backgrounds. They found the reasons to be: lower levels of educational achievement in school, lower educational aspirations, lower school completion rates and endemic educational disadvantage that begins in the earliest years of schooling.

¹ “Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System” 2009

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CSHE concluded (2008, p.3) that “people from low SES backgrounds are more likely to have lower perceptions of the attainability of a university place, less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education and may be more likely to experience alienation from the cultures of universities”. Saunders (2007, p.19) citing Bradshaw (2004) refers to these factors as a “combination of linked and mutually reinforcing problems”, in a word, exclusion.

Social capital

It is difficult to have a discussion about social exclusion without surveying the relevance of social capital. Indeed many researchers regard the absence of social capital and of the circumstances aiding in the formation of social capital, to be a key relational aspect of social exclusion. It is held that to possess social networks is to possess something of value, and that “an individual is more productive when connected to others through relationships characterised by trust, reciprocity and exchange” (Hoffmann-Ekstein et al, 2008, p.5, citing Putnam, 2000).

Morrow’s research (2001a; 2001b) was a watershed in terms of the development of a research methodology capable of developing an understanding of how social capital is constructed through investigating the perceptions of young people. The research was carried out with teenagers in two comprehensive high schools in an English ‘new town’ about 70kms north of London, and was designed to explore young people’s subjective and everyday experiences of their neighbourhoods, and the nature of their social networks. Discussions explored young people’s use and perceptions about their town and their neighbourhoods in relation to the extent of their sense of belonging and identity with their neighbourhoods/communities; their attitudes towards institutions and availability of facilities in their community; and their participation in decision-making in their schools and communities in general (2001a, p.258).

Morrow (2001b, p.43) notes the problematic nature of the term ‘social capital’ with respect to how accurately this term resonates with different age groups, genders, and ethnicities. Young people, Morrow argues, have many different ‘social identities’, and the so-called ‘benefits’ of social capital have widely varying meanings amongst the extremely heterogeneous group researchers call “young people”.

Drawing on Putnam (2000) Morrow observes that studies of social capital as it relates to children and young people can usefully be viewed as having two forms: bonding capital and bridging capital (2001b). Bonding capital amongst young people reaches high levels for example, in gang membership. However although this form of social capital may be highly functional to the group and to the individual as part of a group, this may not necessarily be the case for the individual as a member of the wider community.

Hoffmann-Ekstein et al (2008, p.2) refer to this as the ‘dark side’ of social capital as it has the potential to exclude young people from community connections. Citing Woolcock and Narayan (2000) they argue that this form of social capital, borne of “intense group loyalty”, isolates young people from resources located outside the group and pits them at “the mercy of the values within the group”.

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Possessing bridging capital on the other hand is substantially more functional in the longer term, as it assists one to bridge “other divisions such as gender, social class, ethnicity or generation” (Morrow, 2001b, p.43). Bridging capital has also been conceptualised as assisting young people to have access to the type of future they aspire to and to assist them to “escape from disadvantage” (ibid). Both forms are necessary however, as Morrow observes, they may not synchronise at the same or ‘right’ times in a young person’s life - bonding capital is important in the ‘here and now’, whilst bridging capital pays dividends in the longer term.

A third form of social capital of relevance to young people has been termed ‘linking’ social capital (ibid), and is a form of social capital that links young people to ‘influential others’ enabling “access to power structures” (ibid). For the young people involved in Morrow’s research, this form of social capital was clearly lacking.

Morrow concluded (2001b, p.42) that for young people *community* exists in a “virtual community” of friends based around school, the town centre and street, and friends’ and relatives’ houses. Social capital in the form of civic participation was generally lacking for the young people. They are denied a range of participatory rights and this limits their sense of self-efficacy.

Alloway et al (2005) surveyed some of the recent Australian literature relating to conceptualisations of social capital in rural communities (eg Henry, 1998; Kilpatrick, Field and Falk, 2001; James et al, 1999; Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman, 2001; Kenyon et al, 2001). They found the influence of family, school and community on social capital to be substantial, which in turn has a major impact on young people’s aspirations (p. 48-50).

The fact remains that however researchers may prefer to describe or classify social capital, knowledge is lacking about how children and young people create and experience it outside of their school and immediate family (Hoffmann-Ekstein et al, 2008). These authors state the case for “a fresh perspective” on social capital and social exclusion - one that recognises that:

Children are central to the social capital literature...(but that) the literature tends to exclude the voices and experiences of children in communities and their agency in social capital, and treat them as objects of protection or sites for developing functional adults (p.5)

Children and young people’s participation in research

Since the 1990s a new approach to studying children has emerged that involves children and young people’s own participation and agency. James (2007), Christensen and James (2000) and Prout et al (2006) are key proponents of conducting research “with children rather than on children, with children’s participation in the research process foregrounded and acknowledged “(James, 2007, p. 262).

Hoffmann-Ekstein et al, argue for a ‘reconfiguring’ of studies around social capital theory (2008, p.21) to take account of children and young people’s agency with

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respect to how they see the networks and supports in their communities, and the ways in which they would like to be involved. Too often in such studies their voice is missing, and researchers are left without a deep understanding of children's and young people's networks and relationships.

Berti (2007, p.5) maintains that it is difficult to make cultural progress if we can't move beyond the concept of children and young people as "weak subjects to defend and protect". He maintains that we must instead give "greater space and visibility" to the idea that children and young people have the right to express their ideas and be actively involved in building their futures.

Malone (2007, p.15) regards the frequent positioning of children by adults as "invisible" and as "passive recipients" of whatever environments they happen to find themselves in as both ill-conceived and ill-informed. She argues that children are constantly "negotiating and reconstructing spaces in powerful and significant ways".

McDonald (2005, 2008) similarly encourages listening to children's voices in social research, and moving away from viewing children as objects of protection. "...we need to go one step further and develop understanding about how children – in the complex contexts of their daily lives – constitute themselves." (2005, p. 13).

However, James (2007) warns that a research approach that includes children's own voices should not assume that they speak for all children, and such research must acknowledge the differences among children. "The voices of children that we include in our texts ...must be recognised as crafted; "authenticity" must be interrogated, not assumed" (p. 265). Further, she states that children's voices must "be regarded as standpoints, places from which any analysis sets out, rather than definitive descriptions of empirical phenomena embodied in the words that children speak" (2007, p.269).

Many issues relating to research with children and young people were discussed in a think tank conducted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2008). The process of obtaining consent for research children through the filters of parents and schools is examined in one study. The Commission changed its approach during a research project and was able to obtain "active consent for children only and passive consent from parents" (p.113). The Commission found differences in parent passive and active consent research outcomes as a result.

Indigenous, cultural and linguistic identity

Australia in the twenty-first century is a non-homogenous mix of races, cultures and ethnicities. The population consists of Indigenous communities and multiple cultural groups resulting from migration since the eighteenth century. Indicators pointing to disadvantage in health, wellbeing and access to education among Australia's Indigenous population are well documented (Alford et al, 2007; ARACY et al., 2008; CHSE, 2008; Craven & Marder, 2007).

There has been some criticism (Humpage, 2006, Pholi et al, 2009) of the application of social inclusion policies and indicators in Indigenous policies in both Australia and

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New Zealand. Pholi et al (p. 1) write that “the pursuit of statistical equality for Indigenous Australians... reduces [them] to a range of indicators of deficit, to be monitored and rectified towards government-set targets.”

Hayter (2009, p.7) identifies a gap in policy discussion in the Australian context in understanding the effect of cultural and linguistic diversity on social inclusion or social exclusion. She points to international studies that recognise the differences in the ways that “people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities build networks and relationships” (ibid. p. 14)

Cultural identity and Indigenous identity require sensitivity to differences that may emerge when collecting and analysing data. The authors aimed to allow the data to speak and to differentiate the spectrum of social exclusion and disadvantage within and between various groups.

The role of neighbourhood effects

Hayes et al (2008, p.22) contend that living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood is associated with poorer learning, health, job and educational outcomes. Disadvantage and social exclusion undoubtedly have a geographic dimension, as locational disadvantage has been a constant finding of most studies associated with social exclusion. Vinson (2007) for example found strong correlations between geographical locations (by way of postcodes) and significant levels of concentrated, entrenched and enduring socio-economic disadvantage.

On the other hand, Alloway et al (2004, p.263) who conducted their research in fifteen different sites across Australia, concluded that they could not discern a “distinctive rurality factor” over and above other effects such as “socio-economic background, economic development and labour market conditions”, in the development of young people’s aspirations and expectations about their futures.

They argue that the concept of ‘rurality’ was as diverse as the locations in which they conducted their research, but the one constant was the enmeshing of their aspirations and expectations in “the economic circumstances and labour market conditions in which communities were embedded” and that student determination to further their education and training was inversely related to these economic factors (ibid).

The role of cultural capital

As opposed to wealth, income and other more commonly held descriptors of socio-economic disadvantage theorists of cultural capital propose that social reproduction is maintained through society’s institutions such as the education system. A number of authors contend that parental education is one of the most important factors in determining social disadvantage (eg, Marks, 1999, Daly et al 2006, Alloway et al. 2004).

Devlin (2004, p15) has observed that “cultural capital is typically missing from a family where no member has ever attended university”, adding that students who are

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the first in their family to go to university are more at risk of 'dropping out' due to an absence of "the intrinsic knowledge required for persistence, and of supportive networks". James (2001, p.471) refers to the "encouraging effects of cultural capital" that are brought about through family traditions of going to university.

Hayes et al (2008, p.20/24) warn of the need to recognise "the cumulative nature of disadvantage, including across generations of the same family", and discuss the "intergenerational transmission of disadvantage" by way of education, income, occupational status. James (2000, p.7) in his study on the attitudes and aspirations of young people in relation to tertiary education and work focussed on parental educational attainment as the "most suitable measure of students' socio-economic background", as opposed to the more common measures of socio-economic status such as income and wealth.

CSHE (2000, p.7) concluded that parental educational levels and occupation 'superior indicators' of an individual's SES as opposed to the geographical determinism of the postcode of their home address. They assert that Australian and international data show consistently that parental education levels and occupations are predictors of achievement at school, school retention and completion, and educational aspirations". From their data they conclude that it is likely that "parental educational levels are the best predictor of the likelihood of higher education participation".

James (2000) defined three levels of socio-economic status (SES) based on parental education: (1) Lower SES - students whose parents' highest level of education was early secondary (2) Medium SES - students whose parents completed secondary school and/or a vocational/TAFE qualification (3) Higher SES - students whose parents had completed a university degree. Significantly, James found:

A strong association between parental educational attainment and young people's attitudes towards schooling and education ... students from lower socio-economic backgrounds ... are the most likely group to report that they are 'marking time' at school until appropriate opportunities emerge (p.12)

James' conclusions (2000, p.17) about the importance of family effects, or cultural capital, are very clear when he states that "the level of parental education is the single most important factor" in influencing students' attitudes toward their future tertiary education and job aspirations. Mallory et al (1999, p.6) view family effects not so much as a 'barrier' but rather as a 'gap', finding that "parents want their children to go on to tertiary study but they lack the experience, confidence and know-how to facilitate that happening". Alloway et al (2005) concur with this view, especially in relation to rural families whom they argue may not be able to see the 'value' of tertiary education "especially where it is likely to involve student relocation and additional financial burdens" (p.58).

The findings of Kenyon (2001) cited in Alloway et al (2005, p.47) are particularly pertinent where they declare that:

The value of education is not necessarily obvious to many rural people...few family members have engaged in post-compulsory education, and even fewer have tertiary qualifications... young people commented that they had no relevant role models in their communities who would emphasise the importance, benefits and value of education and

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learning - no 'voice' that would or could challenge family traditions and understandings (p.47).

CSHE (2008, p.1) state that "Improving the higher education participation rate of people from disadvantaged groups is believed to be important for their long-term social and economic integration. Widening participation and encouraging intergenerational social mobility might lead to more cohesive and more economically successful societies".

Marks (1999, p.7/8) comments that when the father's occupation (and to a lesser extent, the mother's) is applied as a measure of socio-economic status, relationships are observed with levels of school achievement, but that this factor alone is not sufficient to explain any variance in achievement test scores. Parental occupation perhaps exerts a more subtle rather than direct effect as described by Mallory et al (1999, p.5) in their research into the attitudes of students in central Queensland schools towards post school study options, when they found that "...they wanted a 'good job' when they left school and their perception of a 'good job' appeared to be influenced by their parents' employment area".

The role of schools and teachers

Pini et al (2010) have documented what they refer to as a 'cultural turn' in the study of class advantage and disadvantage in educational settings, and the role of teachers in the emotional inscription and embodiment of social class attributes. They undertook their research in the setting of rural and remote Australian schools, and found that "the moral ascriptions of class by the teachers are powerfully shaped by dominant socio-constructions of rurality" (p.1) through the "affective evaluations" that teachers make. They concluded that teachers make "clear divisions" (p.19) and "attributions of morality to the employed and immorality to the unemployed" (ibid).

By way of contrast, Abbott-Chapman (2007) in her research on participation in post-compulsory education by disadvantaged students noted the influence of what she termed positive "teacher effects". This refers to the beneficial role teachers can play through modelling 'excellence' and 'enthusiasm', and in encouraging students to raise their aspirations. Abbott-Chapman asserts teachers who do this can assist their students to "surmount hurdles posed by socio-economic background or rurality" (p.286). Alloway et al (2005, p.56) also stress the significant role that quality educational experiences play in the formation of young people's aspirations about their post-compulsory education options.

The role of gender

Researchers have also noted the influence of 'gender effects'. Alloway et al (2005, p.64) cite Marks and Fleming (1999) who noted that Year 9 boys living in regional areas were about 1.4 times more likely to leave school as boys living in metropolitan areas, and that boys living in remote rural centres were twice more likely. Marks and Fleming's study found that the odds for boys living in rural and remote regions of leaving school early, that is not attempting Year 11, were so strong that the attributes

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of their gender combined geographic location far outweighed family effects, their socio-economic status or their school type.

James (2000) also found gender effects in relation to the formation of post-school study preferences, perhaps not as strongly as Marks and Fleming, but nevertheless influential in certain ways. For example, he found that boys expressed a much stronger preference to go to TAFE rather than university, and were more 'utilitarian' in their approach to the purpose of education, regarding university as "a way of delaying the hunt for a job, and that universities are for wealthy people" and that "you learn more in the 'real world'" (p.14).

Another finding of significance to this research was made by James (2000) in relation to the aspirations of young people concerning their post school educational and job futures. He found that these important aspirations are formed much earlier on than just during the last one or two years of school. This finding has been underlined in recent reports by a number of individuals working in university outreach programs. Stewart (2008, p.6) recommends that university outreach programs should make contact with students "well before Year 8 and must engage communities and families well before children enter high school, and it must be focussed upon raising aspiration".

Education, socio-economic status and rurality

Many researchers have discovered a strong nexus, or as James (2001, p.456) puts it "discomforting evidence of a three way intersection" between rurality, low socio-economic status and educational disadvantage.

James (2001, p.469) contends "rurality and socio-economic status combine to produce the greatest educational disadvantage". Some of the factors that have been observed in this nexus include: family expectations and support, type and availability of employment opportunities, young people's own perception of their abilities, 'images' of university life, degree of familiarity with universities, income levels and perceived costs and benefits (Alloway et al, 2005).

To this list Western et al (1998) add the following: distance; inadequate support services or curricula of rural schools; low retention rates of rural students in the senior years; and, socio-cultural factors such as the value that rural families and communities place on higher educations.

James (2001, p.458) states that

"previous research, on balance, suggests the problem of rurality and isolation is not predominantly a problem of distance from universities. Social class-related effects of student personal attributes, academic achievement and parental influence, and the wider influence of significant others such as teachers, have, in the past, been claimed to be more important factors in the decision whether or not to go on to higher education than has geographical separation".

James found only one study (Behrens et al 1978) that indicated rurality operates independently of socio-economic factors. He argues (p.459/470) that factors

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associated with family socio-economic background are especially powerful when they coincide or combine with rurality.

James also found (2001, p.470) that factors of location, that is distance from a university campus and the nature of the “community context”, also at times combine with a young person’s socio-economic background to influence the development of their perceptions about higher education. In this respect he argues (p.458) that: “observed rural-urban differences in participation in higher education are mainly the result of the characteristics of families related to rurality, rather than to rurality itself - the economic and educational backgrounds of families living in rural areas”.

Cocklin and Dibden (2005, p.167/8) argue that “the link between education and social exclusion is well understood” and that lack of access to educational resources excludes individuals from global marketplaces, confining them instead to local labour markets, and limiting their life chances. They observe that in rural Australia there are significant barriers to young people in terms of access to tertiary education (not the least of which is the financial barrier), and that the proportion of young rural Australians going on to tertiary education is declining.

As previously stated, a strong link has been observed (Alston & Kent, 2009, p.93) between access to education and social exclusion, most notably in remote, rural and regional settings. These researchers found that there is a high factor of financial influence in terminating school and making choices about going on to university (p.98/101). Thus there seems to be an interplay between the formation of low aspirations and the reality of low levels of parental income, the high costs of tertiary education, and the high living costs associated with going to university.

As important as financial factors are, what is still not clear is “the extent to which financial considerations...are inhibitors or barriers to university for people from low SES backgrounds in comparison with broader aspirational and school achievement factors” CSHE (2000, p.3). The Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA) (2008, p.3) cites research conducted by the University of Melbourne which found that the development of young people’s aspirations around going on to university “are influenced by a subtle web of interwoven characteristics [including] ... social background, financial resources, where people live and the collective values of the community culture”. Hillman et al (2002, p.5) argue that added to perceptions of financial burdens are perceptions of the emotional burden that many rural, remote and regional students foresee in terms of living away from home without everyday parental emotional and physical support.

Cardak and Ryan’s research (2006, p.2) was based around the hypothesis that ‘going on’ to university is not just a matter of finances. “It also depends on educational outcomes in earlier stages (and that) even without credit constraints such a framework can predict lower university participation by students of low SES”. They contend that the manner in which early school performance “translates” into academic performance in the later years of school accounts - above any other factors - for the vast differences in the numbers of high and low students attending university (ibid).

Cardak and Ryan found (p.27) that “the gap between groups widens from Year 9 to Year 12 (and that) given identical early school achievement, high SES students perform better through high school than low SES students”. They traced the

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explanation to the nexus between low SES and early learning and life experiences that “manifests in lower than average early school achievement”, and consequently argue that programs such as university scholarships for low SES students may be ineffective given that “interventions should be targeted at students aged below 8 years” (ibid).

James (2001, p.455/470) also alludes to this and argues that for rural and remote students whilst distance from a university campus is an important factor, it was a less powerful influence on their participation rates in higher education than their “socio-economic circumstances and the influences of (their) rural social and cultural circumstances...(and) differences in family and community attitudes towards the relevance of education”. Significantly, James (ibid) also found that these influences were “apparent well before the final years of schooling”.

The role of access to technology

Although technology has not featured very strongly in recent studies around young people and social exclusion, it is being increasingly recognised that “the digital divide” is a dimension of social exclusion and limited access to the internet and other technologies can be taken to be an indicator of exclusion (Hayes et al, 2008, p.10). Zappala’s (2003) research shows households with lower socio-economic status have lower levels of access to the internet and a computer (p.69-74). This is an aspect of social exclusion well overdue for more research attention.

Health and well-being

Several researchers (Bourke et al, 2009, Morrow, 2001, Oliver et al, 2006) acknowledge the role of young people and children in their community, and how they experience the places they live in as being part of the broader concept of health and wellbeing. Oliver et al (2006 p.5, citing Catalano et al 2002) refer to the importance of “community and connectedness” in developing resilience and positive mental health among young people. They state (p.4) that “engaging in meaningful activities, experiencing control and autonomy, and feeling connected to one’s community, are important contributors to the development of resilience (citing Catalano, 2002). Bourke et al. (2009), in a case study of young people in rural Australia highlighted the impacts of the ‘social’ and ‘rural’ contexts on health and wellbeing. Wyn (2009a, p.1-2) draws a connection between the health and wellbeing of young people, their participation in education and employment, against a backdrop of social change. This is notably so in rural and remote areas, among Indigenous youth and those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Wyn 2009b, p.48).

Conclusion

This literature review has explored the scope of a research project investigating the interplay of social inclusion, social exclusion, disadvantage and education among children and young people within the wider context of health and wellbeing in rural and regional areas. Difficulties of definition of many of these concepts have been

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identified in the literature. Within the methodology the need to record and analyse children and young people's own experiences in their own words has been highlighted. These findings have informed and helped shape the research process and the design of the research instruments.

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