Building a new generation: Community Expectations on raising aspirations in rural Tasmania

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Abstract

This paper analyses a community-based educational program involving private and public sector partners instituted in a small city in northern Tasmania. The program represents part of a state-wide initiative to challenge the persistence of structural educational disadvantage and what is understood to be an entrenched "culture" that is insufficiently attuned to the necessity of further education. In this paper, we analyse this program from the perspective of key community partners drawing on a series of semi-structured interviews. We offer an analytic framework that suggests an integrated approach to thinking about supporting educational achievement, attainment and retention in regional Australia. It is our view while there is much that regional communities struggling with change can learn from this program, there are conceptual limitations in the way the problem of educational achievement is understood that should be enhanced by a more comprehensive understanding.

Introduction

Much has been written about Tasmania's challenges. In fact, an entire issue of the *Griffith Review* published in 2013 riffs on Malcolm Gladwell's now famous phrase and situates the state at a "*tipping point*" (Schultz & Cica, 2013). While some of the pieces celebrate the natural beauty, culture, art and potential of the state, many of the pieces in this publication point to the need for thoroughgoing social and cultural change in Tasmania (West, 2013). One particular focus of this need for change is in education. By most measures, Tasmania has the lowest levels of postsecondary participation and Year 12 completion of all Australian states, in some cases rivalling the Northern Territory, with its well-known challenges of geography and social exclusion for the absolute bottom on some comparative educational indicators (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2016; Eslake, 2016). It is well understood in Tasmania, at least amongst state business, professional and bureaucratic leadership, and other opinion-makers, that things need to change. State newspapers regularly publish data and commentary that keep the problem of educational attainment, achievement and what is considered to be the root problem of "aspirations" in the public eye.

This paper analyses an initiative undertaken in one regional area in Tasmania that has been rocked by industrial restructuring, globalisation and a complex of modernising change forces. The program represents the kind of local action that neoliberal governance models envision as communities autonomously identify and respond to local challenges presented by globalisation and large-scale social change forces (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Rose, 1999). Our work in this paper reports on an analysis of a particular program aimed at introducing Year 5 children to the occupational landscape of the area in order to address the difficult "wicked" problem of educational aspirations and educational retention in a rural regional community where the norms of post-compulsory education have not yet been universally established. We use Amartya Sen's (2001) work to question aspirations discourse with his idea of the *"capacity to aspire"* and use critical aspirations literature to frame this interview-based, critical qualitative inquiry into leaders' constructions of the problem of educational performance and retention in regional northern Tasmania. This analysis relies on the work of educational sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein who have argued that while individual choice is important to understand educational decision-making, voluntaristic and psychologised conceptions of aspiration and choice can never fully explain patterns, paths and trajectories taken by students.

Leaders in the community we studied reported they reached the conclusion that they would need to be proactive to face the future and established a core group comprised of representatives from business, education, government, non-government and the community to address long term and entrenched issues in the community and to target goals in a 20-year strategic plan.

> *… when we designed this, it was intentional we didn't want our work to be portrayed as a teacher-led initiative because it diminishes what it's about. Equally we didn't want it perceived as just a bunch of business guys and ladies getting together because you've got to go back to the end purpose and the subject matter and that's the children. So, it is intentionally designed to have that balance with educators and industry coming together.*

Programs to "raise aspirations" in communities of disadvantage are not new, indeed in Great Britain, the United States and Australia such programming has been instituted in more or less coordinated ways to support the production of self-directed neoliberal subjectivities that are defined in psychological terms as "aspirational" (Gale & Parker, 2015; Hart, 2012; Purcell, 2011). The very idea of aspirations then frames problems of educational disadvantage in terms of the choice practices of individuals and families rather than in terms of access and what Amartya Sen calls the capacity to aspire (2001). In the last decade, a considerable literature has developed in response to the inward turn instantiated by neoliberal demands for new educational subjectivities, some of it relating to the particularities of rural social and educational policy (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Corbett, 2016; Corbett & Baeck, 2016; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015). This literature suggests that a critical approach to how the idea of aspirations are understood is an important part of understanding how communities and the individuals within them engage with education and career preparation.

Here we offer an analysis of the *Aspire High* program as it is understood from the perspective of six community leaders interviewed as part of a larger project that analyses the impact of the program itself. The research reported here is based upon six semi-structured interviews with community leaders who were instrumental in developing the *Aspire High* program. This was an availability sample that represents an equal mix of private and public sector representatives. Five men and one woman were interviewed and the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically (Aronson, 1995). This work has received institutional ethics approval.

We present findings on the ways that community leaders differently understand the problems of educational aspirations and retention beyond compulsory education and how these understandings tend to simplify a complex situation, potentially making the program itself less effective than it might be. We conclude by presenting a conceptual model that positions aspirations contextually and in a way that recognises psychological orientations and choice but that also recognises structural and cultural affordances as well as school factors.

Expanding the dreamscape and opening horizons of possibility: Thinking critically about aspirations

In Tasmania, unlike in most other Australian jurisdictions, high school finishes in Year 10. From Year 10, some students opt to go on to matriculation colleges for either academic or vocational programming or, for some, a mixture of the two, with a considerable number of students not continuing to post Year 10 education (Cranston et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2016). This research effectively confirms a generation of work by Tasmanian rural education analysts who conducted investigations into the complex tensions, cultural practices, social norms and structural features of the Tasmanian post compulsory school system (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Gabriel, 2006).[1] Commenting on the way his awareness of this research influenced how he thought about the problem, one community leader recalls a conversation he had with a school principal prior to the development of *Aspire High*.

> *I said I thought it was really interesting, you know that they'd identified that students were already making up their mind at such an early age and what could we do about it and she came up with this idea of Grade 5 students being an excellent age group to start thinking about careers and Year 11 and 12 because that's when they start thinking longer term, start thinking about the future and start to understand that if I do this then you know things will change.*

There are several things that are interesting about this quotation. One is the optimism it contains. Another is the way that educational research, taken seriously by community leaders, can generate proactive solutions to difficult and established problems that reach across sectors. A third is the view that education is not simply a problem for educators to manage. Rather than focussing on established retention rates as an intractable problem or as a reflection of a resilient culture which is impossible to change, this quotation illustrates how a finding, which is somewhat pedestrian in the educational research community, can motivate a proactive approach which takes up the problem at a grassroots level and attempts to establish networks to quite literally change young people's minds. In our interviews, each of the community leaders focussed on a different aspect of the problem, some taking a more psychologically oriented approach focussing on how to shape educational choice practices, while others spoke to the structural disadvantages that generate the problem in the first place.

The overall focus of this *Aspire High* program is not so much to get 10-year-olds thinking about specific career choices but, rather, to get them thinking in terms of careers that can be dynamic and changing through the life course; in other words, to develop a flexible, reflective, post-Fordist or neoliberal subjectivity (Weis, 2004) armed with an adaptable array of learning and

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[1] Until late 2016, with the passage of a new Education Act, compulsory education effectively ended in Tasmania with year 10 and the completion of high school (years 7-10). For years 11 and 12 study, in most parts of the state, young people were required to attend matriculation colleges located exclusively in the state's four cities.

working capacities and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). One of the principal aims of the *Aspire High* program is to disrupt and destabilise more traditional and static associations with particular career trajectories that are relatively static and whose character is formed in childhood, becoming largely unconscious and habitual (Bourdieu, 1984, 1992). So rather than getting children thinking about particular careers as end points, the program is designed to present an open-ended and exploratory perspective that encourages lifelong learning, change and flexibility. This is, one might argue, the inculcation of a neoliberal subjectivity; but for community leaders, it is a matter of preparing a workforce for the emerging knowledge economy. The focus here is on changing perceptions and habits, as well as familiar cultures, marked by what are characterised as outmoded ways of thinking and working. It is the "locked-in" nature of the "traditional path" which is seen as problematic to most[2] leaders of the program, who were responding to research that discovered that many young people in regional centres actually have their futures plotted out at a very young age (Corbett, 2009; Robbins, 2012).

> *I think the world we are trying to build is a whole new generation of young people who understand all of the opportunities that are going to exist in the future and can aspire to, like what we said, they are not locked into any particular traditional path, but they also understand the value of education and completing education to get to those paths.*

The program also seeks to address what might be termed "the moral economy" of those who are considered not to work at all (Sherman, 2009). Children who live in homes where "they have never seen anybody working" are particular targets of this career education initiative. What the *Aspire High* program purports do is to help young people, particularly those from families that have not been engaged in extended educational trajectories and in regular paid work, to see the value in staying on at school and going onto tertiary study.

In addition, community leaders recognise the economic and social diversity in the community and understand how educational choices and career path visibility are framed by a student's family social position (Gale & Parker, 2015; Raco, 2009), which has a particular placed inflection in rural-regional communities (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Corbett, 2007, 2016; Zipin et al., 2015). Historically, Tasmania's matriculation colleges were primarily attended by academically motivated students, according to one community leader, and in order for a young person from a low SES family or primary and secondary industry-focussed family in a rural-regional community to persist on to finish an academic Year 12 far from home, was a significant challenge and an anomaly.[3] There is recognition in this program that the expansion of horizons of possibility and aspiration are an important part of the initiative.

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[2] Interestingly though, we did encounter one leader who took the opposite view that schooling was not sufficiently attuned with the needs of traditional industry. We present this below.

[3] Currently, the provision of Years 11 and 12 education in Tasmania is in the process of a somewhat controversial transition. In 2015, the state government introduced that select high schools (which finish at Year 10) would "expand" to include Years 11 and 12. This initiative has expanded to approximately 30 schools at this writing and is scheduled to go further still. There is considerable debate about whether or not small rural schools in Tasmania can provide quality upper secondary education, but there seems to be general consensus that a system that does not provide a suite of secondary school offerings close to home is not ideal. Aspirations are clearly shaped by ongoing conversations between educators and families and the distance and relatively impersonal relationships that mark college attendance appears to have an impact on aspirations. This situation is mirrored in other jurisdictions as this quote from the UK illustrates:

> … pupils were disadvantaged by the school's lack of a 6th form and would be reliant upon an FE college careers advice after the age of 16 '. . . which is pretty impersonal [because the college] doesn't know them. And yet the school has known them for 5 years and their family so you can do a

> *I think that the first three schools [to be chosen for Aspire High], all came from that … had a low socio-economic flavour to them. So, I think they were driven by the fact that, yes, you do need to, you know, broaden the horizons of a lot of the students.*

Here we encounter a way of framing the problem of educational attainment in Tasmania and in many other largely rural and otherwise peripheral/marginal educational spaces that locate the source of underperformance in the attitudes of families and individuals or in contemporary discourse in terms of aspirations (Corbett, 2016; Hart, 2012, 2016; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Purcell, 2011; Zipin et al., 2015). All families aspire; the question is to what do they aspire and, furthermore, what kinds of career paths appear *"coherent and convenient"* (Bourdieu, 1984) to differently located youth? Such a question raises cultural issues at a different level closer to Sen's (2001) notion of the capacity to aspire. Here culture is not something which is deficient or somehow broken and in need of change through attitudinal adjustment. Culture, in this sense, is a rational adaptation to a set of material circumstances that provide certain affordances and opportunities that appear as reasonable while others seem out of the question. In order for culture to change in a powerful way, the material circumstances within which decisions are made must change as well. This can occur when young people make the decision to strike out on their own and depart from the established family pathway. For the most part though, the sociological record indicates that young people tend to be more powerfully influenced by their immediate life conditions, which is to say, by their families and the social class practices (typically defined as "choice") occurring within them (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

Changing habits, changing culture: Modernising educational attitudes

In the following section, we present an analysis of how cultural change is understood by community leaders. Some community leaders responsible for establishing *Aspire High* see the program as a way to change the fundamental *"structures of feeling"* (Williams, 1995) upon which they think educational underperformance is predicated. For these supporters of the program, the ultimate objective is to change how young people look at their occupational and educational futures. Community leaders seem motivated by a sense of obligation to young people who do not benefit from middle class advantages their own children enjoy. For one leader, this realisation came out of the experience of seeing young people in the community who seem to him to lack the support of a pro-education family.

> *This project is to sort of try and break that hiatus or that paradigm and where there are kids that aren't fortunate enough to grow up in households where they're encouraged to value an education and to believe in themselves and to this project … I think when you're a father or mother yourself and you do realise you've got kids that grow up in a household where they are provided with encouragement not everyone experiences that, especially when you see your own children's sort of friends and acquaintances you know because we are a small community here.*

In his classic analysis of the powerful influence of both family patterns and ordinary quotidian practices enacted by families, Pierre Bourdieu coined the term "habitus" (1984, 1992). The idea of habitat is well understood. It is the place where different species know how to live and operate on an instinctive level. Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to the sedimented practices that are

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lot more work with the family' (Archer & Yamashita, 2003, p.66)

habitual in the sense that they represent embodied, ordinary, daily practices undertaken in familiar physical locations using familiar tools. While there are problems with this way of thinking about human agency (Ranciere, 2004, 2007), Bourdieu's conceptual tools focus on the way that people's active choices occur within structural conditions that create a multitude of different "logics" that can only be understood with the contexts in which they are enacted. What he calls the *"logic of practice"* (Bourdieu, 1992) is not a formal or even discursively available (Giddens, 1979) set of rules for engagement; rather they represent what he called a "sense of the game" or an embodied feel for familiar situations.

Bourdieu's concepts help us to understand, what is called locally, the "culture of education" in the community. This culture is the ordinary sense of how things are done in a locale and represents a way of framing and understanding how individuals make choices. Indeed, the very idea of choice is central to current political discourse around education, which is itself situated as a commodity via human capital frameworks (Becker, 2009). In contemporary educational systems that have significant elements of private and quasi-private offerings, for instance, the onus is shifted away from universal provision of a service, to a menu of educational choices in a marketised environment (Ball, 2012; Vincent & Ball, 2006). Through an analysis of different forms and different scales of data, parents and youth themselves are imagined as educational consumers charged with making the right choices. One community leader recounts an emblematic story about a student's account of the greatest barrier to her completion of Year 12:

> He said he was quite taken aback when she said the biggest challenge I have is my mum and dad and my brother. And she expanded to say the challenge I have is them basically ribbing me about as they say too big for my boots because I'd gone on to Grade 11 and 12 where they hadn't and again there was the subtle putdowns which they probably didn't realise what impact that was having on her.

In terms of Bourdieu's concepts, this kind of statement can be understood in a number of ways. First of all, there is the perspective of the speaker for whom such a position is unthinkable, in the sense that his family habitus features the assumption that all young people require Year 12 completion. From the perspective of the family members, the known habitual life patterns, hierarchies and knowledge forms appear to be challenged or disrupted by the daughter's aspirations. This pattern is linked for this community leader to mobility patterns that are mythically associated with further education. To aspire differently is defined as "selfish."

> I suppose the folklore around education in Tasmania that you know there are families out there that fear, as their kids become better educated, they will move and leave them behind. And I suppose as they age they won't have their families in their later years, which this might sound a bit rude, but personally I think it's a fairly selfish perspective but you can understand how people might feel like that.

It is possible of course, to define the selfish perspective as one that aspires to a world that may not include one's family. The daughter herself is placed in the position of operating between what Basil Bernstein (1970) called *"the culture of the family"* and *"the culture of the school."* This community leader's way of framing the problem of educational achievement and aspirations is situated in both a historical analysis of the economic development of the community, as well as the culture this development engendered and an analysis of modernity and future projections that assumes the need for a differently educated work force.

> I think the other mindset you know as we go through another transition in our community, or as you put it more broadly, is gone are the days where you could leave school in Grade 10, this is before my time or even earlier and there was a ready-made job for you out there

and you went and picked which one you wanted. We had the pulp and paper mill here for many years and there were a lot of people you know who went to the pulp mill to get a job and I think, from what I sort of hear, again just anecdotally talking to people, is that the attitude that is fairly consistent is: 'well I got by without an education so why did you need to?'

Associated with this educational and economic analysis is the desire for a positive framing of higher education as a welcoming space. Ironically too, the old industrial structure is no longer a welcoming space for willing workers (if it ever was). Helping young people imagine themselves into university, for instance, is a key part of the agenda. This is a question of identity formation and supporting young people to see themselves differently as participants in what were considered historically to be exclusive and even elite spaces of higher education. Another leader put it this way:

> *We want people to feel comfortable going into the university so they don't see it as this building on top of the hill. Because, again, otherwise that feeds that mindset that we talked about earlier about the families, you know, why do you need to go onto further education, that's only for those other people – the rich, the wealthy, the well to do or whatever. No, it's for everyone.*

However, the critical literature on aspirations argues that Sen's (2001) capacity to aspire needs to be considered. To aspire, in this sense, is to situate oneself in a cultural geography of what is considered possible and to make choices based on an analysis of what can reasonably be expected to work out. Aspirations then depend on the life situation of the aspirant. Thus, the question remains as to whether families: a) have real financial and geographic access; b) find tertiary education a welcoming space; c) find the values articulated by community leaders useful and valuable in their particular circumstances; and d) imagine how tertiary participation will strengthen their families and communities in the same way that community leaders do. The aspirational logic of practice of differently positioned families needs to be understood better and the assumptions about the "culture" of educational underachievement, as it is defined by community leaders, can be problematised by better context-specific, habitus-sensitive analysis. It may be that such an analysis will discover that the logics employed by families are essential to their day-to-day survival and reflect both conceptions of sensible use of available resources as well as real barriers (Corbett, 2001; Hawkins, 2014; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2014; Zipin et al., 2015).

Getting in touch with a changing agricultural landscape: Challenging myths and increasing the visibility of modern careers

There is a clear view amongst the community leaders we interviewed that contemporary careers are less visible to young people than they might be. Young people who grow up in families where their own parents have limited education and limited exposure to the nature and shape of contemporary careers tend to struggle in school. The phenomenon of children wanting to be fire-fighters, police and hairdressers reflects the visibility of careers which are important but which do not necessarily represent the areas in which most contemporary career opportunities exist. For instance, while Tasmania is well known for agriculture, the actual work that farmers do today is not well understood by many young people. Referring to an *Aspire High* presenter, one leader commented:

> *She talked for about an hour just really practically about what they do in a farm on a day-to-day basis showing a little bit of visual examples of that and just talking and answering*

questions from the kids, you know, responding to their interest and giving a bit of that information and it seemed to work really well. So maybe you know there's an opportunity to do a little bit of that grounding for kids, so you're opening their minds a little bit before they say oh yeah, well, I think I might go and visit the fire station or, you know, go and see a hairdresser. They tend to focus on those commonly known occupations, which at the end of the day when you get older, really aren't the big employers or the areas that people might be able to look at a career opportunity.

Many young people seem to form their perceptions about industries that operate out of the *"line of sight"* (Corbett, 2010) from common imagery that misrepresents the reality of working in that industry today. Agriculture is an industry where leaders argue that myths and misperceptions tend to shape how many adults and young people alike see a dirty, repetitive and physically demanding job, rather than a potentially diverse career requiring a variety of skills and knowledge. In a sense, the industry operates behind a curtain of traditional understandings of what agriculture is and how people enter it. One of the key operating assumptions here is the core notion that there is a mismatch between common perceptions of labour market needs and conditions and the working understandings with which families and youth navigate their educational and occupational decision-making. Furthermore, persistent ways of misunderstanding key industries and educational pathways to secure employment serve as a limitation for individual youth and a rationale for their exodus from rural and regional communities, which impedes the development of the workforce that is needed for modern agriculture.

And again, I think if we can get more younger kids understanding about farms they can still get a tertiary qualification but they can come back and work in a senior position on a dairy farm and that will offer them a lot of challenging activities and opportunities. It might mean they move away from a farm into other service or consulting roles around the industry. The industry is quite dynamic in that regard, once you're in there there's a lot of different avenues that can open up to people depending on what floats your boat. You know? And you don't know that often until you get into there. From the outside, it's not always clear …. That's often the way with careers that until you're in somewhere you won't really understand it and that's when other doors will open to you.

Here we see how perceptions of this industry are shaped by entrenched stereotypes that discourage academically inclined youth to consider agriculture. At the same time, these stereotypical notions create the perception that non-academically inclined, robust youth are best suited to agricultural work. This, in turn, creates the impression that contemporary agriculture is a relatively undesirable and low wage employment option. This, leaders agree, has led to shortages of skilled farm workers and agricultural entrepreneurs.

… there are not enough of those young people in Tassie (Tasmania) who want to do that. That's why we're bringing in existing skilled labour from elsewhere to work in the industry. So, like New Zealanders out of the dairying over there come here to work in dairying in Tasmania. People from the UK. Some of those people might come as a farm manager or they might come as a share farmer or they might come as operator.

He went on to say that the reputation of the industry has been slow to change and *Aspire High* is part of a wider initiative to change perceptions and young people's understandings of education to provide a better window on contemporary careers. Like the other community leaders we interviewed, he views this program as a long-term prospect that will begin to pay dividends into

the future. He juxtaposed the established negative understandings of farming with emerging understandings of industry change and future labour market needs.

> … dairying hasn't been regarded as an industry of choice in the past, in fact, it's probably had the other reputation but, in the last 15 years, I think that's changing now. It's almost like you're on the pathway to generational change, it's like you know a 20-year process and that's why we are investing in school programs, really. We might not get all the kids today but, in 10 or 15 years, we'll get a certain amount of that, that builds its own momentum a bit more.

A different line of thought: The trades

While the industry and community leaders we interviewed generally supported the push toward education providing the human capital needed for social and economic development, there was a minority opinion that emanated from another part of the business community.

> I'm of a differing thought line. I didn't do Year 12, I only did Year 10 myself. And I've never taken a student who has done Year 12; they all only got to Year 10 and then started their apprenticeship and I've had no problem with any of them being able to learn and so on.

This view represents an established sensibility that questions the link between schooling and development that is the cornerstone of human capital theory (Becker, 2009). This position reflects this leader's need for workers willing to learn on the job in an apprentice-style situation. Indeed, he believes this is the only way the skill set he needs can be attained. He also argued that it is important to get workers accustomed to hard labour in challenging physical conditions and saw little use in keeping his potential workers in school beyond Year 10, unless they were receiving an industry-specific, job-ready curriculum. He commented:

> I don't know what difference those extra two years… it would depend on the courses they chose to do in Year 11 and 12, of course. And if they did say photography and hospitality they'd be no good to me they wouldn't learn anything. So, like I said, if I was taking on an apprentice tomorrow I would look favourably at a Year 10 student that done the right TAFE program and had some good references from the person they'd done their time with … and I could see that they were going to do something.

There remains an important role for traditional trades and, indeed, many of the industries in the community have not yet mechanised to the point where the need for human labour power is entirely or largely absent. In these industries, older traditions in the community that rely on the importance of hard work, discipline and a hands-on skill set not learned in academic programming, remain present. This leader, for instance, emphasises that in his industry staying on to Year 12 is not a necessary requirement, and indeed, it can be an impediment to producing the kind of worker he wants. Ultimately, this position assumes that rural/regional locations should focus principally on vocational education, often arguing that rural youth are more dispositionally suited to "hands-on" work rather than academic study, a position which is stereotypical and problematic (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Down, Smyth, & Robinson, 2017).

Opening the options: A social justice perspective

For another leader, a role in government services affords a unique insight into a wide range of families within the community. This organisation is part of a wrap-around service model providing

citizens with a one-stop-shop for community services such as housing, legal and health support, aimed at removing barriers to education and employment. Here we see a social justice framing of the problem of aspirations and the unevenness of the aspirational landscape. He has observed a widening gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" and believes education is the key to interrupting this trend.

> *We see... a lot of families and a lot of clients who are members of family units who have been entrenched in the social welfare system over generations. And some of these families have never had people who have finished secondary education, never gone to university, never obtained a trade, so it's opening the options.*

His organisation's involvement in *Aspire High* is a way of emphasising for children the importance of finishing their education and realising the opportunities that exist because of that education.

> *We're not saying you're going to be a social worker or a manager. We're saying that if you continue with your education that may be an option down the track. But you still might be a diesel fitter, that you might still go and be a teacher, or a physiotherapist, or an architect, but it's those options – keeping those options open and the education pathway to us is the primary avenue for that to occur.*

For many students in this area, higher education has not been a part of their family's experience. In this region, the percentage of people with a bachelor degree or higher is 8.8%, which is markedly below Australia's average rate of 18.8% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011). However, the percentage of those holding certificates and diplomas (27.9%) is slightly above the Australian rate of 26.1% (ABS, 2011). These data indicate that people there are undertaking further education but are likely to do so in the vocational education sector rather than at university.

Educational decisions undertaken by families and young people are subsequently understood within the structuring framework or that which can be seen from the family's position in the social and economic landscape of a particular community. What this community leader's comments illustrate is the difficulty of engaging families that lack the necessary point of sight that would allow them to imagine themselves into occupational worlds that are essentially invisible to them or which are written off as not, to use Bourdieu's terms, "for the likes of us". Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field serve as tools for understanding why social and cultural change is so slow to happen. What these tools are less able to explain is how structured, sedimented and habitual patterns can be transformed.

It is one thing to show a young person a professional work situation, it is something else to help that young person and his or her family believe that they could ever access this world. At one level, this is a matter of inspiring young people to imagine themselves into spaces that are unfamiliar to them and their families, but at another level, there is the question of the pragmatic day-to-day business of preparing for a professional career. This involves a serious engagement in school, a commitment to further education and even to lifelong learning, but it can also mean destabilising established cultural patterns and identity positions to which people may be attached. This is the key notion of "cultural change" which is a central policy discourse used to situate the steering of the attitudes of target populations in a different direction. One dimension of the cultural resources available to young people has to do with the concrete forms of navigational information possessed by their families. For instance, middle class families and networks effectively steer their children through school careers and tertiary education and then on to business and professional training (Bok, 2010; Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011; Smith, 2011).

For the working class, some primary and secondary industry-focussed and economically marginal families, both the education system and the landscape of careers that education is supposed to

open up is something of a hidden world. What *Aspire High* seeks to do is to lift back the curtain and offer a glimpse of this world to children.

> *... it's about students realising that there's a lot more out there for them than what they may have already thought or what their families may be telling them. And that you are only in Year 4 or 5, there's no point in making a decision now but what you can do is hopefully keep your options open and continue on with education in whatever form that may be, whether it be vocational, university, trade-based, whatever ... But it's also letting them peek behind the curtain but also letting them come back if they want to come back again.*

Conclusion: Aspiring in sociocultural space

How do aspirations and expectations fit together for young people as they make their way through school in the community? Industry partners have a number of perspectives on the problem, and while each person we interviewed recognises the complexity of the problem of educational underachievement and retention, and how it is interconnected with other dimensions of community life, their analyses tend to focus on one of four main categories: family capacity, school-related issues, established cultural practices and structural barriers. The way that each of these dimensions relate to one another tended to be organised hierarchically, with one or another positioned as the aspirational driver. Most often, family as the aspirational unit was positioned at the top of the hierarchy, with school, cultural and structural features further down the list. We conclude, however, that community leaders and educators need to work together but also that they would benefit from a better understanding of the complexity of the problem they are working so hard to solve. We suggest a schema for understanding the complex matrix of aspirations, which are simultaneously family, school, structural and cultural problems as presented in Figure 1.
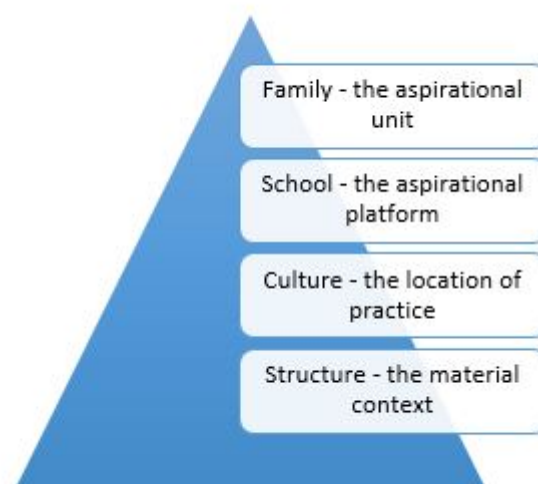

Figure 1. *Aspirational Hierarchies*

While the family is located as the site where decisions are ultimately made, there is general recognition that families are nested within communities, structures and cultures. It is also understood that families have different levels of engagement with schooling and with the labour market on the basis of this engagement. In other words, disengagement with work, community

and the society begins early, which is precisely the point of the *Aspire High* program. Many young people set their aspirational course at a relatively early age, and in too many cases, this course essentially recapitulates structural and cultural patterns. Community leaders all identified challenged families and particularly those families that have been socially and educationally disengaged, sometimes for several generations, as both the target of intervention and the source of educational underachievement. In this sense, families targeted as problematic were not seen as a source of strength but rather as a drag on the aspirations of their children.

As we illustrate in the first parts of this paper, contemporary understandings of aspirations recognise how choice and agency are mediated by school, social and cultural factors. To paraphrase Marx (1852/2016), people aspire, but they do not aspire in circumstances of their own choosing. If the family is the aspirational unit, the school might be called the aspirational platform or a space of possibility, emergence and growth. While all community leaders obviously focussed on the importance of the school, to a certain extent, this was not their terrain and the school was seen to function as a bit of an institutional "black box" in which young people were prepared for social and economic participation in the community and beyond. Some community leaders argued that the schools needed to change to better serve the young people they receive, while others tended to see the students and their families as the chief object of remedial attention. Still, no community leader suggested an alternative or even modified school curriculum or programming. Yet, these leaders assumed that different children require different forms of schooling. It also needs to be said that no community leader referenced the need for industry or economic interests to change to become more receptive to a broader range of potential employees. Nor was there much discussion of the need for entrepreneurship, creativity or skill in particular subject areas. School was principally seen as a socialisation mechanism for the labour force and its practices were generally taken as given.

Against the backdrop of family and school, community leaders recognised the importance of the general attitudinal landscape and public perceptions of the role of education in the formation of modern workers and community members. The ultimate aim here is the inculcation of what has been called a neoliberal subjectivity (Cairns, 2013; Corbett, 2016). The idea of "culture change" was prominent in leaders' analysis of the need for a different sensibility with respect to school completion and tertiary education. These analyses focussed on the figure of the disengaged family which is alleged to be dismissive of the importance of credentials and qualifications, satisfied with basic schooling, and which can even ridicule and deride a young family member who aspires to further education. The message of the need for cultural change and the development of new norms and habitual practices in disengaged families that promote and support higher education was central to this discourse. In this analysis, family cultural practices were taken as a source of deficit rather than a repository of funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), particularly those in families that "don't work" (Sherman, 2009) in the sense of operating outside the paid employment.

Finally, there was recognition of the different material circumstances of differently located youth situated in different social structural positions. While this view was less commonly articulated, there is recognition that some young people and their families face barriers in terms of their ability to access and make their way through secondary and tertiary education. These barriers may exist because families cannot manage or justify the cost of credentials, or because the opportunity costs of remaining in education, in terms of lost potential wages, are considered to be too high. The structural position of particular families or young people, of course, articulates with cultural practices in families whose experience has not included education beyond compulsory education (or less).

It is our conclusion that by focussing principally on one or another of these explanatory frameworks, the holistic nature of educational achievement is inadequately understood. While the community program that we have analysed here is an important and potentially powerful instance of coordinated work targeting improved educational results, the tendency to regard low achievement, low educational engagement and retention as essentially psychological, cultural, structural, or school-based issues, obscures how each of these ways of seeing educational problems link and overlap. The tendency to focus on one or the other of these causative explanations can lead to an approach that "boils down" a highly complex problem to either individual attitude and values, cultural habit, money or the quality of teaching. In Figure 2, we present the challenge of seeing educational achievement, aspirations and community development as a complex interchange in which culture, structure and school are understood to interact, with none of them sitting permanently at the top of the hierarchy.

The large arrow indicates the continuous motion of the triangle where no category remains at its apex. The rotating triangle also moves through time, never remaining static, as both aspirations and the structural and cultural features of communities and schools change and transform. Social structure is represented in the figure by the measurable aspects of production and reproduction broadly framed in terms of economic relations. Next, the culture is the material and discursive elements of daily life including language and tools. Thirdly, the school is the aspirational platform where bodies and objects operate as assemblages for the socialisation of young people. Finally, at the centre of the family or its proxy, the aspirational unit is the individual student whose dreams and intentions are obviously key to any understanding of educational aspirations and achievement.
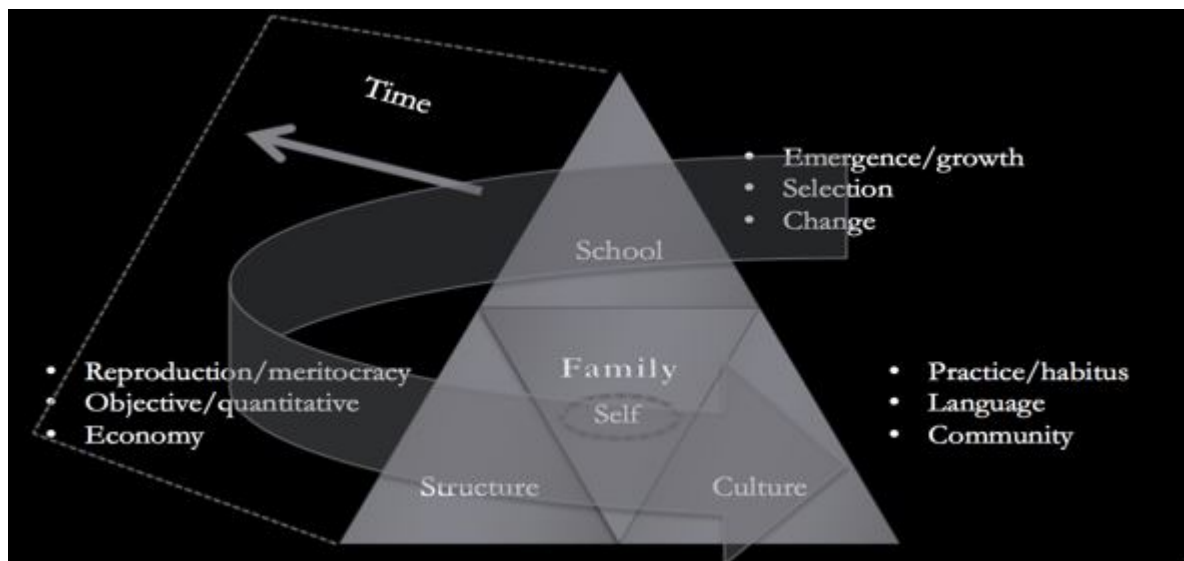

Figure 2. *A mobile, mutable aspirations model*

These elements operate together, and while they can be conceptually separated as causal factors with respect to educational attainment and retention, as the leaders have tended to do, we would argue that a combinatory approach better represents contemporary thinking about capabilities, capacity building, community development and education, generally. Thinking in a more complex way about the interaction of the five analytic elements (the self, the family, the school, the culture and structure) is, we think, the difficult but necessary task that may lead to more effective programming and a more holistic and impactful approach to raising aspirations in rural Tasmania.

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