Community Beliefs about Rural and Regional Education and Students' School Completion

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Abstract

School completion to the end of Year 12 in rural, regional, and disadvantaged communities is an acknowledged challenge in Australia and internationally. This research reports the beliefs of 86 rural and regional community leaders in the Australian state of Tasmania. A survey on issues associated with students' school completion was designed specifically for community members, and responded to by the study participants. Findings that emerged from the data analysis included that participants were on average quite positive about the capability of students in the community and the potential for business/organisation links with schools. Some concern was expressed, however, about bullying in schools and students having well-formed plans for their futures after finishing school. This study provides a benchmark for future research with community members on their beliefs about issues related to students' educational aspirations and students' continuation in school. It has implications for policy makers, school leaders, and teachers at a national and international level.

Keywords: beliefs, community, rural education, school completion, students

Introduction

It is both theorised (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and acknowledged from longitudinal research (Berns, 2012; Smith, 2014) that schools are affected by their wider communities, and in turn, the schools effect their wider communities. This interaction between the two helps to shape the beliefs and behaviours of both the members of the school community and the members of the schools' wider community in relation to each other. Rutter (1987, 1999) reported that a school's community can have a positive or negative impact on the students attending that school. Specifically related to the current research, Rutter reported that positive interactions with the community can open up opportunities for students that act as key turning points in a child's life, and foster, among other traits, a "*persistence in education*" (1999, p. 137). Furthermore, Rutter's research on protective factors for students reported that even when a school was located in a disadvantaged area, the influence of community members could have a positive impact on a school and on targeted students. This is encouraging, as other research, both in Australia and internationally, has shown that the likelihood of disconnecting from schooling is increased if the student has a background of disadvantage (e.g., Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Swanson, 2009). In Rutter's longitudinal research and that of others (e.g., Homel, Elias, & Hay, 2001; Welsh & Farrington, 2012) the typical disadvantaged community was characterised by the

risk factors of economic disadvantage, high rates of welfare dependency, high levels of unemployment, and high rates of students not completing their high school qualification. How schools can access the protective factors of community leaders and community members is still a complex issue (Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Hands, 2008; Smith, 2014; Welsh & Farrington). Given the argument that completing high school is an important protective factor that can help mitigate the risks associated with living in a disadvantage community (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, & Jetson, 2014; Gale et al., 2013; Haywood et al., 2009), the study reported here focused on the beliefs of community leaders about completion of the compulsory years of schooling by students in their communities.

Interest in beliefs is predicated on the assumption that what people believe influences what they do (Pajares, 1992). It has been argued that beliefs differ from knowledge only in the extent to which there is consensus about them (e.g., Beswick, 2011). The extent of consensus about a particular belief depends upon the context—specifically the community in which the belief is articulated or otherwise manifested—and can change over time. The argument that Beswick made in terms of an individual's beliefs can be readily extrapolated to the shared beliefs of a community. That is, for a particular community, at a given time, widely held beliefs are essentially knowledge and are enacted as such. Community members *"know"* certain things to be true even though these things might be contested in other contexts.

Green's (1971) metaphorical description of belief systems offers two constructs that are useful in understanding how beliefs interact, and that informed this study. First, beliefs can be more or less central. More centrally held beliefs have many connections to other beliefs and are strongly held. The relative centrality of beliefs varies with context (Green). This means that an individual can sincerely espouse belief in the importance of education in one context—perhaps during an interview about school completion—and not be nearly as adamant in another context—say, at a local sports event—where other beliefs, such as in the importance of expressing solidarity with friends is more central. The extent to which an individual articulates and acts in accordance with a particular belief in a variety of contexts, the more central that belief is likely to be (Green). Changing centrally held beliefs necessitates major psychological upheaval and hence influencing them is difficult.

Second, beliefs can be held in isolated clusters and not connected, allowing an individual to hold contradictory beliefs without being aware of the conflict. This situation is likely to arise when different beliefs develop in different contexts (Green, 1971). The collective beliefs of community members create expectations among young people in relation to completing school (Deggs & Miller, 2011). In their US study, Deggs and Miller found that although rural communities placed a high value on education, they were also concerned to maintain their community and valued resident loyalty. Belief in the importance of staying in the community and in the importance of completing secondary school, which may facilitate leaving the community to pursue further education or employment not available locally, create a tension. It is possible that these beliefs are held by some, perhaps many, community members in separate clusters.

The beliefs of community members, and especially those that are broadly shared, such as in relation to school completion, may be influential. In this study, beliefs of interest were those that were articulated by multiple community members and hence likely to be the most commonly held and thus to constitute a shared belief or community norm in relation to school completion.

Many issues have been found to influence school completion: socio-economic status (SES) and disadvantage, school support, parent support, literacy and numeracy ability, rurality, cost, and community attitudes and interaction with the community (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Cranston et al., 2016; Fullarton, 1999; Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014; Hay et al., 2016). Although other researchers have reported on views about the community and its involvement in education (see, e.g., Gregoric, 2013; Gregoric & Owens, 2015;

Hands, 2008; Hands & Hubbard, 2011; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Warren, 2005), there is less reported research from the perspective of community members specifically on their opinions related to student engagement and completion of secondary school. Besides the reports from this project (Watson et al., 2015, 2016a, 2017), there appears to have been little attention paid to community members' opinions on school completion. Although Ice, Thapa, and Cohen's study (2015) in the United States explored school climate and school-community partnerships, it did not consider issues associated with school completion to the end of Year 12. Using beliefs as a lens through which to consider the influence of community on school completion is also novel and provides useful insights into the ways in which community norms might be influenced in ways that enhance school completion rates.

Defining the Community

This study follows the lead of Gregoric (2013) in considering the community as those people and organisations, either non-profit or business, who potentially have involvement with schools. In rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas where education may not be as highly valued as in the cities, they are a subset of the total physical community, which can be differently subdivided, with some community members having a futures-oriented perspective, and others wishing the community to stay as it has always been (Corbett, 2014, 2016; Fendler, 2006). Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, and Gale (2013) present two similar perspectives on the dilemma facing marginalised students, focusing on low socio-economic communities, as they position themselves for adulthood. On one hand, the community encourages students to become educated and more highly employable to fit the middle class ideological aim of economic benefit to the nation. On the other hand, Zipin et al. contrast this with the historical community context of many low SES students that limits their aspirations in the previous sense of middle-class goals. Within that context, Zipin et al. hypothesise a third alternative where students are assisted by the community to build on their existing knowledge within that community environment to create *"emergent futures,"* but these authors have no concrete suggestions as to what these are. Although the question of *"futures"* is complex, the method of selection of participants for this study suggests that they were aware that their communities were likely to hold the initial perspectives recognised by Corbett and Zipin et al.

The Current Study

With the foregoing background on the importance of beliefs, this study explores the beliefs of rural and regional community representatives about the educational environment in their communities (encompassing students, teachers, parents, and the local community). The location of the study was the Australian state of Tasmania, which is classified as a regional and rural state within Australia with pockets of disadvantage (Norrie, Englund, Stoklosa, & Wells, 2014). In the state education system in Tasmania, most students in Years 11 and 12 attend city[i] schools (Colleges) separate from those catering for the earlier years, with high schools (Years 7 to 10) located in cities and larger regional centres, and district high schools (Years K to 10) in rural communities. Although this situation is beginning to change with some urban and regional high schools now extended to Year 11 and 12 (Department of Education, 2016), the norm is still as described here.

Traditionally, particularly in rural communities, compulsory education was assumed to be until the end of Year 10, as described in Department of Education (2015, p. 8). Those completing Year 10, therefore, are at a stage of life where continuation is a stark issue and staying on for further education is likely to mean travel and enrolment in a larger school. Data on Year 12 completion

rates over the last decade indicate concerning levels of completion in Tasmanian government schools. For example, in 2008, the rate of completion in Tasmania was 55%, compared with the rate for government schools in all of Australia of 67% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). This is a concern as the consensus is that students' successful completion of 12 years of education is a minimal requirement for the well-being of citizens (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013) and for economic growth in national, state, and local communities (OECD; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, & Youth Affairs, 2008). Given these concerns and potential changes in the state education system, this research is important because ascertaining the beliefs of members of rural and regional communities can assist educational leaders to implement systems and policies that meet the specific needs of the students within those communities, as well as of the overall community.

The study reported here was part of a much larger Linkage project with the Tasmanian Department of Education, investigating many issues that were potentially related to students continuing beyond Year 10 in state government schools. Sixty-five regional, rural, and remote schools were involved and surveys were administered to students, teachers, principals, and parents to explore their views. Interviews were carried out with key figures within the Department of Education and the wider community, and case studies were conducted in schools chosen by the Department as adopting positive measures to increase completion rates. Analyses completed to this point suggest: from the case studies and interviews with Department officials, that retention beyond Year 10 may be a *"wicked problem"* (Allen et al., 2017; Cranston et al., 2016); from the parent surveys, that parent-child *"connectedness"* is a factor in completions (Hay et al., 2016); from the student surveys, that teacher support, friends, academic ability, and other school activities are predictors of students' aspirations for continuing their education (Watson et al., 2016b). In relation to the community, interviews with 11 members of the community (not related to this study) found that educational pathways were a significant issue for them (Watson et al., 2015) and that student-centered activities were more common for their local engagement than family-, school-, or community-centered activities (Watson et al., 2016a). Local engagement was also considered with the sample from the current study, finding that participants had more involvement with school-centered activities than with the other three types (Watson et al., 2017). The beliefs of this group are the focus of the current study.

Research Question

What do members of rural, regional, and disadvantaged communities believe about their local school environment in relation to issues identified as important for students staying in school beyond the compulsory years?

Methodology

Instrument
The survey instrument for this aspect of the larger research project was designed to explore the community members' beliefs on the issues that research had identified as important for students completing school beyond Year 10. An early pilot study (Watson et al., 2013) and initial analysis of data collected from nearly 4000 students (Watson et al., 2016b) suggested that there were seven identifiable factors influencing students' beliefs and behaviours related to staying in school beyond Year 10. In the order of the relative strength of their influence, the factors were teacher support, student aspiration, mathematics ability, English ability, extra-curricular activities in the school setting, parent support, and student confidence to proceed beyond Year 10. Because of their importance to students, items were translated into wording that would reflect the

community members' beliefs about the factors. The seven categories of items from the factor analysis of student data were reduced to six by combining personally-worded items on mathematics ability and English ability into one category of external belief in students' overall ability/capability. Other items were developed from the perspective of business and the community (Murray, Cunningham, & Shone, 2008) or written to determine how comfortable the community members felt in dealing with local schools. All items were vetted and supported as meaningful by three members of the community who served in various capacities. Eight topics were hence covered by the 33 items about community beliefs: Teacher support (A), Aspiration (B), Ability/Capability (including Mathematics ability and English ability) (C), Parent support (D), Beyond Year 10 confidence (E), School setting (F) (e.g., safety, facilities, student satisfaction), Business links (G) (e.g., importance of school completion to local business), and Community links (H) (e.g., communication with locals, ease of involvement). All items were positively worded and were coded on a scale from 1 to 5 (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree). They are presented in Table 1 in the Results section. There were three text boxes evenly distributed throughout the Likert questions where respondents could expand on their Likert responses (e.g., Figure 1).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
At the local school/college students are well prepared for the next stage of schooling or post school/college options.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers at the school/college encourage their students to aim for higher education.	○	○	○	○	○
Increasing retention beyond Year 12 would be helpful to my business/organisation.	○	○	○	○	○
Parents/guardians of students at the local school/college want their children to continue their education past Year 12.	○	○	○	○	○
Education is important to parents/guardians in this community.	○	○	○	○	○
If you would like to elaborate on or explain any of your responses, or comment on any of the items listed in this section, please use the space provided.					

Figure 1. **Sample of survey items and text box for additional comments.**

Sample

A list of 100 local governing councils, businesses, service organisations, and voluntary organisations in the rural, regional and disadvantaged communities surrounding the schools in the larger project (see Watson et al., 2013, 2016b) was compiled by two members of the research team using online search engines and telephone directories. The survey was emailed to 279 representatives of these councils, businesses, and organisations. A total of 86 rural and regional community members, consisting of 45% males and 55% females, completed the online survey. Participants were asked to indicate their highest level of education, with 76% reporting post-school qualifications. Participants also reported the school levels with which their organisation was associated. Of the 75 who responded to this question, the most frequent contact was with high schools, followed by primary schools, colleges, and district high schools. When asked how well members of their business/organisation knew the local schools/colleges about half said *"to some extent,"* about three-eighths said *"a lot"* and one-eighth said *"very little."*

Analysis

The analysis of the data proceeded as follows. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the 33 Likert items. The means for the items were then scaled to indicate the relative strength of the beliefs. Given that many of the survey items were related to common issues, the 33 items were grouped into eight categories, as described earlier. Again descriptive statistics were calculated for the eight categories.

Second, responses in the three text boxes throughout the Likert items (see e.g., Figure 1) that allowed respondents to expand on their responses were categorically analysed by the second author, with categories checked and confirmed by the first author. The majority of responses were clustered by topic into five categories arising from the contexts of the Likert items: (i) the need for varied educational and training options; (ii) poor attitude to education beyond Year 10; (iii) issues around school leadership, teaching, support, and resources; (iv) bullying; and (v) travel time to school. Summaries provide a perspective and examples of beliefs from the community outside the school on issues important to completing school to Year 12 successfully.

Results

Likert Survey Items

Table 1 shows the 33 Likert items asked of community members, with their mean scores, standard deviations and the number of respondents for each item. The items are grouped into the eight topics of interest, whereas the item number indicates the order on the survey.

Table 1. *Likert Items, with Mean Scores and Standard Deviations, Grouped into Eight Categories*

Category	Item number	Item description	N	Mean score	Std. Dev.
Teacher support (A)	2	Teachers at the school/college do a good job.	72	3.85	0.88
	23	Teachers at the local school/college have high expectations of their students.	71	3.59	0.87
	4	Teachers at the school/college encourage their students to aim for higher education.	72	3.71	0.94
	11	Teachers at the local school/college believe their students can learn.	72	3.94	0.87
	12	Students in my community like their teachers.	71	3.51	0.67
	21	Teachers and students at the local school/college get on well.	68	3.65	0.75
	22	At the local school/college students are encouraged to consider university as a post Year 12 option.	71	3.58	0.77
Aspiration (B)	27	Parents/guardians of students at the local school want their children to continue their education past Year 10.	68	3.57	0.74
	6	Parents/guardians of students at the local school/college want their children to continue their education past Year 12.	72	3.56	0.80
	16	University is a realistic pathway for students at the local school/college.	71	3.34	1.12
	7	Education is important to parents/guardians in this community.	72	3.92	0.90
	32	Education is important to students in this community.	68	3.93	0.98
Ability/ Capability	8	Students at the local school/college are as capable as students in other schools.	72	4.00	1.01

(C)	17	Students at the local school are as capable of completing Year 10 as any other students.	70	4.09	0.81
	19	Students at the local school/college are as capable of going onto university as students in other schools.	71	3.86	0.93
	30	Students at the local school/college are as capable of completing Year 12 as any other students.	68	4.01	0.87
	20	Education beyond Year 10 is a realistic pathway for students at the local school.	70	3.83	0.92
Parent support (D)	15	Parents/guardians of students at the local school/college take an interest in their children's progress.	71	3.56	0.73
	18	Parents/guardians of students at the local school/college encourage their children to do well at school.	71	3.62	0.87
Beyond Year 10 confidence (E)	26	Students in this community know what sort of job they want to have when they finish their education.	69	2.72	0.80
	3	At the local school/college students are well prepared for the next stage of schooling or post school options.	72	3.47	0.92
School setting (F)	13	The local school/college has good learning facilities.	71	4.06	0.71
	24	The local school/college is a safe place to be.	69	3.86	0.91
	33	At the local school/college bullying is not an issue.	68	2.41	1.00
	1	Students in this community seem happy to attend the local school/college.	71	3.80	0.82
Business links (G)	5	Increasing retention [education] beyond Year 12 would be helpful to my business/organisation.	70	4.16	0.94
	10	Increasing retention [school completion] is more important in Tasmania than in other States/Territories.	72	4.08	1.03
	14	I give advice about career/school/college options to students in my community.	63	3.54	1.06
	25	Increasing retention [school completion] beyond Year 10 would be helpful to my business/organisation.	65	4.17	0.78
	31	Students in my community discuss their intentions regarding schooling with me.	64	3.16	1.00
Community links (H)	9	The community is well informed about local school/college matters.	71	3.17	1.01
	28	It is easy for community members to be involved in the local school/college.	68	3.34	0.89
	29	I feel welcome at the local school/college.	68	3.94	0.93

Figure 2 shows the mean values for all of the items listed in Table 1. As seen in the Figure, the means for 31 of the items were above the midpoint (above 3 on the 1-5 scale) reflecting the majority of community members giving positive responses. Two items had means below the midpoint, indicating a majority of community members believed that bullying was an issue (Item number 33) and that students did not know what kind of jobs they wanted when finishing school (26). Seven items had means of 4 or more reflecting a majority of respondents at least agreed with the statements that the local school had good facilities (13) and the students were capable (8, 17, 30). More generally they believed completing school was important (10) and that increasing school completion rates would help their organisation (5, 25). There was relatively less

confidence about the ease of community involvement in the school (28), the community being well informed (9), and students discussing their intentions with the community members (31), than for other issues, although the respondents felt very welcome in the schools (29). They were also somewhat less certain about university being a realistic pathway for local students (16). Means for other items clustered under or near the values defining the middle of the box plot in Figure 2.
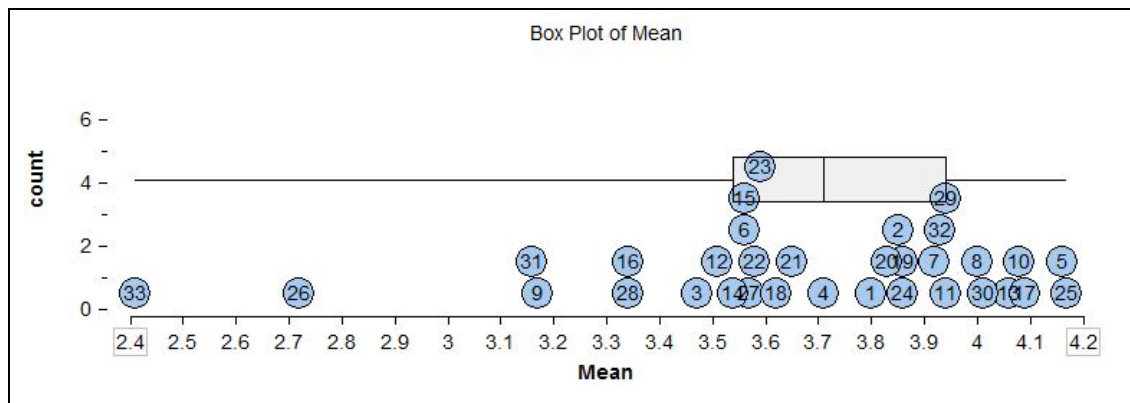

Figure 2. *Mean values for all items in Table 1.*

Clustering Survey Items

Considering the 33 Likert items in eight categories as shown in Table 1, the means and standard deviations for the categories (Teacher support (A), Aspiration (B), Ability/Capability (C), Parent support (D), Beyond Year 10 confidence (E), School setting (F), Business links (G), and Community links (H)) are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, except for Beyond Year 10 confidence (E) that covered just two items on students knowing what they want to do and being prepared, the means for the categories were generally closer to Agree than to Neutral, with belief in the Ability or Capability (C) of students close to 4.0. With an overall mean of 3.6, the results suggest generally positive beliefs about the prospects for educational achievement in the participants' communities.

Table 2. *Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Eight Categories of Likert Items*

	Category	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
A	Teacher support	72	3.68	0.65
B	Aspiration	72	3.67	0.71
C	Ability/Capability	72	3.95	0.72
D	Parent support	71	3.59	0.75
E	Beyond Year 10 confidence	72	3.12	0.74
F	School setting	72	3.54	0.64
G	Business links	72	3.84	0.65
H	Community links	71	3.47	0.78

Open Response Survey Items Related to Likert Items

Comments were made by a total of 36 people in the three text boxes provided along with the 33 Likert questions (see e.g., Figure 1). The comments were a combination of examples from their experience, along with beliefs and suggestions for improvement. Most were grouped into five themes: (i) the need for varied educational and training options; (ii) poor attitude to education beyond Year 10; (iii) issues around school leadership, teaching, support, and resources; (iv) bullying; and (v) travel time to school. Other issues are described in section (vi).

(i)   Varied educational and training options.

Ten comments were made about the various education and training options to enhance student completion rates, attainment, and employability. For example, one participant commented that "*parents want to see a variety of streams and options for their children, be it apprenticeships, intern options, TAFE* [Technical and Further Education] *and tertiary options.*" Another noted that "*while unemployment levels are high it is important that we keep ... children in education,*" stipulating, however, that "*we need to nurture those who are clearly not academic and would prefer labouring or unskilled opportunities.*" It was generally agreed that multiple pathways were required. There was some disquiet about insisting students complete Year 12 qualifications before getting apprenticeships, with one person saying, "*Over-educated people too qualified to get a job doesn't help society.*" Another criticised forcing students to stay in school because it was "*detrimental to those who are keen to continue.*" One person recognised the dilemma of keeping small schools open, saying that although the schools might provide support and keep students involved, they could not offer the diversity of subjects required. More generally, one participant commented that "*increasing retention* [school completion rates] *for higher qualifications or advanced skills is important in Tasmania as we have severely limited jobs available as well as an ageing population to provide for.*" Two people also said that school completion was an issue for all of Australia, not just Tasmania.

(ii)   Poor attitude to education.

Eight people made comments about their observations of the community's attitudes to education. Generally these focused on parents' lack of support for their children's continuing education, either because they did not think it would result in their children finding jobs or because they could not afford it. One person mentioned that "*post-secondary education is rare in our community and unemployment rates are extremely high,*" resulting in "*considerable lack of self-esteem amongst our parents*" with parents finding it difficult to pass on a positive attitude to their children. Another noted that a common attitude in rural areas was, "*I don't do none* [sic] *of that book-learn'n* [sic] *stuff.*" This latter response contrasted with the comments of another participant who lamented the fact that "*students growing up in situations of generational poverty do not receive the support or encouragement necessary to help them finish their education or properly engage* [in education]." Several, however, noted that some parents were supportive and that their organisations were working to change attitudes in their communities, especially in areas of generational poverty and high unemployment. Several also stated their own positive beliefs on continuing education, in contrast to their observations of others' beliefs.

(iii)   School leadership, teaching, support, and resources.

Issues around school leadership and teachers formed another area of concern for community members, as did the need for teacher support and school resources, with 12 specific comments made about these matters. Three participants felt that school leadership played an important role in improving student completion rates, with one commenting that, "*the qualities of the headmaster/mistress make a huge difference to the outcomes and attitudes of the school.*" Two suggested that improving teacher standards and teacher training was also important, as did two

others specifically in relation to support for in-service teachers from the Department of Education Tasmania and to the disparity of resource provision across schools. A related issue mentioned by two respondents was that of teachers living outside of their school community and the impact this had on community spirit and the relationship between the school and the local community. Linked to the above comments on poor attitudes to education was the notion that the influence teachers and school leaders have on school completion rates is dependent on parental attitudes to education, with one community member noting,

> [N]*ot all parents give their children the support they need to succeed at school. It's not just financial but also positive encouragement and confidence boosting support that is needed. Teachers can only do so much.*

    (iv)   Bullying.

Five members of the community mentioned bullying as an issue in local schools, one stating it was "*closely linked to our higher rates of depression, anxiety and self-harm.*" Concern was noted about digital learning pathways being used for the purpose of bullying rather than for educational engagement. Another also noted that "*if being disrespectful is a form of bullying then there is room for improvement across the community, not just schools,*" and one participant commented that bullying was a particular concern "*for those seen as outsiders by the mainstream community* [such as] *alternative families or where there may be issues around perceived sexuality.*"

    (v)   Travel time.

Four people also commented specifically about travel time to school being a problem in their communities. One participant suggested that travel is a "*significant barrier for those who want to go on past Year 10*" and another commented that "*bussing of children between country areas is killing education in Tasmania.*" Examples were given of various extended lengths of time involved, such as 40 minutes one-way and up to four hours per day, as well as the associated cost. The loss of opportunity to be involved in local community activities such as sport was also noted, as were high dropout rates for those who begin Year 11, as exemplified in the comment of one participant that

> [A]*t the beginning of the year the busses are full. By the end of the year there is a marked thinning out. By the end of the second year* [Year 12] *smaller busses could be used.*

    (vi)   Other issues.

Other issues raised by members of the community included student absenteeism, with one participant noting "*up to 25%* [of students are] *absent at high school level per day*" in her local area. Another participant noted the difficulty in maintaining "*ongoing communication beyond one or two key* [members of the school]," and another commented on the importance of health and wellbeing, noting that

> [T]*he children from local schools perform well at both academic and athletic pursuits. The correlation between the two seems to indicate that a fit and healthy body may lead to better academic results.*

One community member summarised the problem by stating that "*the issue is not about transition from Year 10 to Year 11, it is about retention* [completion] *and direction* [in] *Years 7 to 10.*"

Discussion

As can be seen in Figure 2, the beliefs held are generally located centrally between about 3.5 and 4.2 on a scale of 1 for Strongly disagree and 5 for Strongly agree, suggesting consistently positive beliefs at this level of agreement. There appear to be two sub-clusters in the middle of the data representing collections of belief statements that attracted, on average, similar levels of agreement. The first of these located around a mean of 3.5-3.7 comprises (in the order they appear in Table 1) Items 23, 4, 12, 21, 22, 27, 6, 15, 18, 3, and 14. Although spread across a range of item categories, all relate to the support that the community members believe students receive to continue their education from teachers, parents and, to a lesser extent, the community. The second sub-cluster comprises Items 2, 11, 7, 32, 8, 30, 20, 24, 1, and 29. Together these reflect positive beliefs about the school as a safe place that students are happy to attend and the potential of students in the community to continue and to succeed in their education. Three of the group of four beliefs that attracted the strongest mean agreement (Items 5, 10 and 25) concern the importance of school completion: for business/organisations (Items 5 and 25) and as a national concern (Item 10). This analysis suggests that the most central or strongly held (Green, 1971) of the community members' beliefs concern economic and societal implications of school retention and particularly as it impacts upon their own organisations or businesses. Next are very broad positive beliefs about the school as an environment for students and the educational potential of local students. The least strongly held central beliefs cluster concerns the support that students actually receive to further their education. This ordering of the centrality of beliefs from those closest to the context and interests of community members as most central, to those about the specifics of support provided for students' aspirations in schools and families as least central, is reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory that posits layers of influence on a child's development from the immediate sphere in which a child lives through to broad socio-political factors that have an indirect impact. Community members' most central beliefs relate to aspects of educational aspiration of most immediate connection to their immediate contexts and needs, and about which they have most firsthand knowledge.

In the context of this general agreement but varying strength of the community members' beliefs, their additional comments supplement the Likert questions and are compared to the reports of other researchers from different perspectives.

Capability, Aspiration, and Opportunity
The five Likert items related to student capability to continue their education attracted the most positive responses from the community with the mean for the combined category (3.95) at the Agree level. Related to capability are aspirations. The community members were positive about the importance of education to parents and students in the community but were less certain about university being a realistic pathway for local students. Similarly, respondents on average agreed more strongly that local students were as capable as others of completing Year 10 (Item 17) than that they were capable of completing Year 12 (Item 30). This caution reflects some of the findings of Gemici et al. (2014) from longitudinal data suggesting that a significant proportion of students themselves are unrealistic at 15 years of age in their high aspirations, compared to what they actually achieve by age 25. The impact that ambivalent community beliefs about local students' capabilities and the ultimate achievements of those students appears to warrant further investigation.

Opinions and examples provided in the written responses illustrate two of the perspectives introduced by Zipin et al. (2013). On the one hand, many of the community members in the current study were in agreement that education is important in terms of employability but stressed the importance of alternative educational and training options as one way to help improve students' educational outcomes. To the extent that the belief that students are either academic or not that was reflected in the responses of these community members is shared by

teachers (who are themselves members of the community) is arguably problematic in that it may mediate aspirations for students according to the category into which they are deemed to fall. On the other hand, examples suggested by community members in the current study included families that placed no value on *"book-learning,"* or that were happy to continue to be unemployed. An unskilled job after Year 10 may be the aspiration and therefore spending time studying at the Years 11 and 12 levels may be a waste of time for students and their teachers. Although a few of the excerpts from the community members showed that they appeared to recognise the dilemma and perhaps desire another pathway for *"emergent futures,"* they, like Zipin et al., had no concrete solutions.

Parents and Community Links

Community members presented many perspectives on the part that parents play in the aspirations of their children and their decisions about continuing their education beyond Year 10. There were both positive and negative aspects associated with these perspectives, with financial issues important for some but not others, ranging from the need for extra family income to different family values that did not include education or the financial benefits it could bring. In the US study of Byun et al. (2012), parents' expectations for further education (in this case tertiary) and how to pay for it, were significantly positively related to students' aspirations. The participants in the current study also noted that some parents in their communities were supportive of education and training, and of the community members' efforts to change community attitudes to education. These positive impressions complement the findings of Abbott-Chapman et al. (2014) in a study of parents in isolated Tasmanian communities, and those of the parents surveyed in the larger research project with which this study is associated (Hay et al., 2016).

Community members saw that the attitudes that students assimilate from their parents and their contacts within the community influenced their reactions to the pathways offered to them by the education system. Of interest was the specific reference to values held by the parents, including lack of understanding of the value of education. This lack of understanding was also seen to extend beyond the immediate family to the local community, reflected in observations about lack of qualifications in the community and trends to complete school at Year 10. These views have also been well documented by other researchers (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, 2011) and mirror the findings from interviews with other community members in the larger project (Allen et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2015, 2016a).

The written comments of the community members in relation to unemployment and leaving school for whatever employment opportunities were available were balanced, including the belief by a few that in fact some students do not belong in school. The idea of co-responsibility was reflected by several in terms of both influence and providing opportunity. The comments also need to be juxtaposed with those of Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) who reported an *"observed tendency for resilient, strongly bonded families of low SES to 'look after each other' and share information and resources"* and the importance of *"word of mouth"* (p. 56). Corbett (2007) went so far as to refer to this environment as an alternative education system that has its own largely kinship-based processes to support informal learning and sharing of skills, knowledge, and resources.

Influence of Schools and Teachers

In commenting on principals and teachers, the majority of community members expressed support for the level of leadership provided in schools and its positive influence on students' aspirations. Byun et al. (2012) reported a similar influence of teachers' educational expectations in their study of the aspirations of rural secondary school students in the United States. A few views, however, in the current study were less complementary, for example, about leadership deficits, teacher standards needing improvement, university entry level for teacher education

programs needing to be raised, and lack of rivalry among schools meaning students were not challenged.

Turning from the influence of teachers to the education system's assistance in relation to pathways and transitions, several written comments from the participants reflected concern that some career counsellors were not aware of the necessary breadth of students' knowledge of alternative pathways, and that this knowledge should develop early, particularly in terms of subject choice. Concern was also expressed about the continuing level of support provided to students who did manage to make the transition from small rural schools to much larger, sometimes distant, colleges. These views corroborate the findings of Gale et al. (2013) in their study of students' aspirations for higher education in Central Queensland, an area of similar rurality to the current study. They identified that "*students' capacities to navigate pathways to higher education in the* [state] *education system, are 'patchy' and/or limited*" (p. 6). They further recommended that programs "*need to focus more explicitly on developing students' navigational capacities to realise their higher education ambitions*" (p. 6). There are indications that this is being reflected in Tasmania with the University of Tasmania receiving funding from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program to work in low SES regions of the state to increase participation in higher education by providing pathways and smooth transitions (University of Tasmania, 2013, 2015).

Participants responded with the greatest concern to the issue of bullying. In an extensive review in the United Kingdom, Haywood et al. (2009) identified that bullying was one of the primary institutional barriers to young people participating and remaining engaged in learning past 16 years of age. They also found there was an association of low literacy levels with experiencing bullying, which further contributed to student disengagement from learning.

Business and the Community
In terms of the potential for business and community networks to influence student thinking, community members were very positive about the importance of school completion to business but less certain about their own personal involvement in student decision making. Fullarton (1999) also claimed this positive opinion of the community was reflected by the students involved in the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) study. In relation to community links generally, however, the participants in the current study were more positive about their own relationship with the local school than about the community's relationship as a whole.

Implications for Further Research

Recent research in North America (e.g., Evans, Newman, & Winton, 2015; Miller, Scanlan, & Phillippo, 2017) has recognised the potential of hybrid community-based organisations to have an impact on educational reform. Although that research focussed on case studies of the evolution of such organisations and not on their opinions of, or specific involvement with schools, it would appear valuable to canvass the opinions and beliefs of such groups about the schools and school systems with which they are familiar. It could be hypothesised that these beliefs, for example in relation to the importance of students completing their high school education, could influence the policies developed and the advocacy entered into at both local and broader reform levels. This would provide another perspective on the community voice on the issue. Further, the perspective taken in this study, of viewing beliefs as a system as described by Green (1971), may be useful, combined with system change theories, as a fruitful avenue for future research.

Limitations

The participants in this research did not constitute a random sample of the population of community members in Tasmania because it was impossible to define the population. It was a convenience sample in the sense that it depended on the good will of participants to choose to respond. The generally positive responses from the 86 who completed the survey suggest that they wanted to have their opinions known by the state-wide project. The way organisations were chosen was thorough but only through available sources and this influenced who was involved in this study. Although some views may have reflected the desire for the community to remain unchanged (Corbett, 2014, 2016), they were not the personal views of the participants themselves. Despite the limitations of the sampling, because it was the first known survey of community members themselves in Australia, the outcomes set benchmarks for future research.

Conclusion

This study has considered the beliefs of community members on education beyond the compulsory years in rural, regional, and disadvantaged communities in Tasmania. A core question that arises implicitly from this study's community survey is: How do community attitudes and beliefs change over time and how can they be influenced in ways deemed positive? Reforms in recent times in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011) suggest that changing community attitudes is a challenge. Furthermore, comments made in the current study on rural and intergenerational poverty over several generations cannot lead to the expectation of a quick solution over a few years. To achieve change, governments will need to invest significant funding over two or three decades. Although other research referred to in this study sets up deficit scenarios that cannot expect to be turned around in a few years, estimates of how long it will take to turn the aspirations around are lacking.

The beliefs expressed by community members in this study indicate concern about students staying in school and achieving, and the recognition that completion to the end of Year 12 is a whole of community issue and not just a school issue. In the United States, Sanders and Harvey (2002) acknowledged the importance of community partnerships to improve student achievement outcomes, referring to Melaville's (1998) work, which claimed that an "*active, engaged community ... has an enormous role to play in supporting the schools' mission*" (p. 6). As Villani (1999) stated even more strongly than Melaville,

> *Educational reform will fail as long as it is limited to internal changes within the school. Educational reform must be a community effort. It must reflect a healthy community culture and contribute to the climate of the school. (p. 105)*

The beliefs of the community participants expressed in this survey point to the potential for members of the community to have an influence on rural, regional, and disadvantaged school students. The responses also reinforce Villani's claim, and offer hope that schools in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas can combine the resources of their school system, their parents, and their community to achieve better long-term educational outcomes for their students.

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[i] The entire geographical area of Tasmania is classified as regional and rural (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The authors use the term 'city' to differentiate the state capital, Hobart, and the larger regional centres (Burnie, Devonport, and Launceston) from other, smaller, regional towns.