Parents Matter: Empowering Parents to Inform Other Parents of Post-Year 10 Pathway Options in Disadvantaged Communities

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Abstract

The research, focused on parents with children in years 5-10 in three low-socioeconomic rural and regional communities, drew on an understanding of educational aspiration as culturally and socio-spatially embedded to develop practical strategies for parents to engage with their children as they made education and career pathways choices. It draws from principles of community- based participatory research to address the gap between parental aspirations for their children and parental knowledge by linking parents to expert knowledge and quality resources, building their confidence to discuss post-year 10 options and support their children's choices. This paper reports results from the evaluation of a successful 'initiative' to support parents and families in rural/regional Tasmania to access information about their children's options for post school education and contribute to their aspirations for further study. This research highlights the challenges in engaging parents in disadvantaged communities around education. Establishing trust takes time. Parents are well placed to deliver parent information programs that engage other parents in their children's education and career journeys. Programs must understand the community they are operating in and walk alongside its parents to design programs. Those aiming to increase parents' ability to support children's education should deliver targeted programs in community settings that respond to the context and needs of that community. Facilitators should act as bridges between community, industry, schools and parents to address the gap between parental aspirations and parental knowledge.

Keywords: Career education, educational aspiration, parent engagement, community-based participatory research, disadvantaged communities.

Background

Parents play a pivotal role in providing advice, support and guidance to their children when it comes to making decisions about post-year 10 education and career options and have a

substantial influence on children's education pathway choice (Bok, 2010; Boon, 2012; Fischer, Barnes, & Kilpatrick, 2017; Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014; James, 2002; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). This also applies to others, such as foster carers and grandparents, who are primary care givers (Chiang & Park, 2015; Norwood, Atkinson, Tellez, & Saldana, 1997; Smit, Wolf, & Sleegers, 2001). Primary care givers (hereafter parents) generally have strong aspirations for their children in terms of further education and careers and it is these aspirations that have the most decisive impact on educational attainment post-year 10 (Morgan, 2012).

This paper builds on a body of research which finds that participation in a post-school education and career pathway requires both aspiration for the outcomes of that pathway (typically career outcomes), and perceived attainability of the pathway (Kilpatrick, et al., 2019; Fischer, Barnes & Kilpatrick, 2017). Following Appandurai (2004) and Bok (2010), aspiration is conceptualised as capacity to imagine a future that may be unfamiliar. It is a culturally embedded concept (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) that is influenced by the experiences and knowledge of students themselves, and also of the people around them, including parents. Aspiration requires, but is much more than, awareness of possible career and education pathway options. Perceived attainability of a pathway can be influenced by information about what is involved in travelling on the pathway, the 'practicalities', as well as financial, social and other forms of support (Kilpatrick, et al., 2019).

Career and education information is particularly important for parents living in regional and rural Australia who, in common with other rural adults are less likely than their urban counterparts to have continued onto post-year 12 education. This is particularly true in Tasmania which has historically seen lower transition rates to post-year 10 education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This paper reports results from the evaluation of a successful 'initiative' to support parents and families in rural/regional Tasmania to access information about their children's options for higher education and contribute to their aspirations for further study. This study took place in the context of Australian policy discourse focussed on 'raising', or informing, aspirations of groups underrepresented in post school education, including rural and regional people, for the purpose of meeting employment and skills demands (Sellar, 2013).

Parents and aspirations

Parents from families that are of mid and high SES tend to have experience in the education system and have what Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) term "educational cultural capital", which provides an advantage to their children in attaining educational qualifications (Sullivan 2001). This outcome is partly because more advantaged parents can use their educational cultural capital to inform and support their children's educational aspiration (Gale & Parker, 2015a). Parents from less educationally advantaged backgrounds typically have social and cultural capital of which is not aligned with that of the school, and this misalignment can discourage parents from involvement in their children's education which in turn contributes to children 'eliminating themselves' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 153) from further education. Further, social and cultural capital reproduce and reinforce social norms that contribute to an expectation of what is possible, including rural people's expectations of educational attainment (Gale & Parker, 2015a).

Rural children's educational aspiration and participation are influenced not only by geo-spatial factors, but also by socio-spatial factors (Appadurai, 2004, Gale & Parker, 2015a). Literature on rural youth educational aspirations tends to blend geographic location with socio-economic disadvantage (Robinson, 2012). In Australia, a deficit view of rural communities can conceal the bigger impact on educational aspiration and participation of socio-economic over geo-spatial factors (Alloway et al., 2004; Robinson, 2012; Webb., Black, Morton, Plowright, & Roy, 2015). A number of researchers have found rural young people's aspiration is heavily influenced by socio-cultural factors related to social capital of their parents, friends and other community

members (Cuervo, Chesters & Aberdeen, 2019; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). These socio-cultural factors influence the ability of rural young people, their parents and friends to imagine living, studying and working in places, particularly urban places, and jobs with which are unfamiliar (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Webb et al., 2015). Socio-economic factors realted to rural occupations and life experiences also limit rural people's navigational capacity, or confidence and ability to navigate through complex higher and vocational education application systems, financial and other support structures, transport, and urban accommodation options (Gale & Parker, 2015b). Kilpatrick et al. (2019) identified these factors, along with financial impost and capacity (Polesel, 2009; Alloway et al., 2004) and attachment to place and community (Webb et al., 2015) as factors of rurality. Factors of rurality are factors that influence post school aspiration and participation that may not apply to urban populations, or may be experienced more intensely by rural populations. According to Spera (2005) aspirations are internal representations of desired outcomes parents hold for their children and parental aspirations reflect the importance parents place on their children's educational outcomes. Parents play a pivotal role in supporting and advising their children about further education because they have the most decisive impact on children's educational aspirations and post-year 10 education (Alloway et al., 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Khattab, 2015). Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders' (2012) extensive review of the literature on parental engagement and education concluded that cultivating positive post-year 10 educational aspirations, creating self-confident leaners and increasing overall engagement in learning are inextricably linked with parental engagement and interest in children's post-year 10 educational aspirations, no matter their life circumstances.

When parental aspirations are communicated to children, children are more likely to work hard, learn more and be committed to school (Epstein, 1995; Spera, 2005) and have a clearer pathway in terms of post-year 10 education options (Morgan, 2012). Most children begin to make choices about continuing or not with post-year 10 education during years 5-8 (Alloway, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004). Those who do not see themselves continuing past year 10 may make subject choices in years 9 and 10 that limit their post-year 10 options. According to Broadbent and Cacciattolo (2013), parents should be engaged in school subject choice and career programs.

The quality of assistance parents provide in relation to post-year 10 education, training and career aspirations is strongly influenced by their own assumptions and values around education, and educational experiences themselves (Webb, Black, Morton, Plowright, & Roy, 2015). Although parents want the best for their children, their own educational experiences may be outdated and can potentially reinforce misconceptions surrounding the benefits of post-year 10 education, particularly in rapidly changing areas such as science and technology-based careers (Boon, 2012; Hargreaves & Osborne, 2017). Parents may not have completed school and may have had negative educational experiences (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). Children in primary and secondary school in a recent study indicated that Vocational Education and Training (VET) was less prestigious than university and began to rule out career options at an early age because of an unconscious influence from parents (Hargreaves & Osborne, 2017).

Academic socialisation is the most important factor affecting educational and aspiration achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parents who actively and confidently communicate educational expectations, discuss learning with their children, link current events with classroom learning, foster educational aspirations and make plans with their children for their futures are academically socialised (Emerson et al., 2012). Parents unfamiliar with the modern school system, those who have had negative schooling experiences, or have lower educational attainment and low literacy and numeracy find providing support for their children's post-year 10 pathway choice challenging (Woodrow et al., 2016). These and other life-context variables such as family socio-economic factors and culture create shortfalls in parents' ability to confidently engage in

their child's learning, and further education conversations (Fischer et al., 2017; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Epstein (1995, p. 702) asserts providing a platform in which parents can come together to talk, share and listen to others, whether expert knowledge or lived-experiences means, 'more students are likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, working hard, thinking creatively, helping one another, and staying in school.' This is of particular importance because although parents hold high aspirations for their children, they may not have the educational experiences themselves to draw upon to support their children's educational attainment (Bok, 2010; Craven, 2005; James et al., 2008; James & Devlin, 2006; Spera, 2005).

The Tasmania context

Career and education information events are important for parents living in regional and rural Tasmania, which includes many socially disadvantaged areas, and newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse families. One third of year 9 students interviewed for the *Review of Year 9 to 12, Tasmania* indicated they sought assistance from their families and peers when researching careers and further education options (Masters et al., 2016).

Education to year 12 is compulsory in Tasmania from 2020. Until recently education beyond year 10 was in senior secondary colleges located only in the cities. Starting in 2015, years 11 and 12 are gradually being introduced into high schools (Department of Education, 2019). Young Tasmanians are more likely to disengage from education beyond year 10 due in part to lower aspirations and having had poor translational pathways (Watson et al., 2013; Watson, Wright, Hay, Beswick, & Allen, 2016). Masters et al. (2016) found some students experience high anxiety when transitioning from year 10 to year 11, particularly those not living in the cities. Tasmanian children interviewed for the *Review* who intended to leave school after year 10 believed they did not need year 11 and 12 for the job that they wanted, did not like school in general or believed they were not doing well enough at school (Masters et al., 2016). The *Review of Year 9 to 12*, found there appeared to be a strong correlation between students' desire to continue with their post-year 10 education and their parents' level of education (Masters et al., 2016). Tasmanian parents who are more confident providing post-year 10 support and advice to their children are more likely to engage as learners themselves, providing role models for their children (Millar & Kilpatrick, 2005).

Most post-year 10 educational outreach programs in Tasmania are directed at children and teachers, with few or no programs available for parents, particularly parents of children in years 5-8. The objective of Parents Matter, the project reported here, was to address the gap between parental aspirations and parental knowledge in Tasmania by linking parents to expert knowledge and quality resources. Parents Matter established community-based parent-led groups in three regional Tasmania disadvantaged communities and delivered VET accredited training to group members to equip them with knowledge and skills to plan and deliver career and education pathway information events for other parents. The aim of the research was to evaluate the impact of the Parents Matter model on parent knowledge and confidence in discussing post-year 10 options with their children.

Methodology and methods

This research was conducted within a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010a, 2010b) and used the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Leavy, 2017). CBPR emphasises academic researchers partnering with people in communities as active experts and essential contributors to change, to foster a better understanding of existing needs and community-based influences to improve outcomes (Blumenthal, 2013). It has been used beneficially in health (Leavy, 2017) and school contexts (Kushalnagar, Williams & Kushalnagar, 2012). The action based,

participatory research sought to create a better understanding of the existing needs of the communities and parents as well as to improve outcomes (Blumenthal, 2013). The project aimed to provide opportunities for parents to further develop their skills, knowledge and understanding to support their children's educational aspirations, while at the same time, allowing researchers to understand parents' barriers and enablers for supporting their children's educational aspirations.

The Parents Matter project

Initial stages of the project focused on better understanding the needs of the disadvantaged communities which the researchers worked alongside, consistent with the CBPR approach. A facilitator who was a qualified VET trainer with experience in school, VET and higher education was appointed to the project. Consistent with CBPR, the facilitator established relationships with key community stakeholders and schools (hereafter community partners) in three disadvantaged rural and outer urban communities within a Tasmanian region.

The facilitator recruited parents to take part in community-based learning groups in each of the three communities with the assistance of advertisements and personal recommendations from community partners and schools. All parents recruited were female and included new settlers as well as those who had grown up in the communities. In the small learning groups parents were trained to be "lead parents", equipped to help other parents to learn about post-year 10 education and career pathways. Lead parents were able to acquire, free of charge, three VET accredited units of competence which could be used toward a VET qualification. Units were about communication, working safely with others and organising meetings/events. As part of their training lead parents were required to develop and deliver at least one event for their community that focused on imparting knowledge to other parents about post-year 10 pathway options for their children. This is consistent with the project's CBPR approach.

The facilitator brokered relationships with education providers, developed high-quality, easy-to-read resources on post-year 10 study options for parents, and delivered and assessed the lead parent training. Visits to post-year 10 educational institutions and introductions to industry representatives interested in promoting careers in their industries assisted the lead parents to establish contacts.

Up to four lead parents from each community received training, thereby placing trained people in the communities to make the project sustainable. The lead parent participants from each community trained in separate groups, coming together for visits to the university campus. The project operated in two phases over three years. Four lead parents were trained in phase one of the project and six in phase two. In the first phase of 18 months, the focus was on events held in community venues such as libraries and neighbourhood houses. Following analysis of evaluation data near the end of phase one (see below), there was a stronger connection to schools in phase two which occurred over 12 months, with some events held on school premises including Trade Training Centres which are attached to schools and offer vocational education and training to school students and other community members.

In phase one, across the three communities, eight events including workshops, information sessions and university visits were run for parents. A further six events were held in phase two. Parents who volunteered then undertook training as lead parents. The parent-led groups in each community planned and ran an event targeted at parents of students in years 5 -12; one community ran two events. Events included careers expos and 'speed career dating' for parents as well as students in each community, and visits to senior secondary colleges, TasTAFE, the University of Tasmania and student accommodation for parents living in the community most distant from a regional city.

The project received ethics approval from the authors' institutions social sciences human research ethics committee.

Data collection and analysis

After each phase of this research, reflexive data (Patton, 2015) was collected. Interviews (total n=14) were conducted with lead parents (n=7) and community partners (n=7), including school leaders and individuals who worked at places such as community centres and libraries. The interviews of 20-40 minutes were conducted either via telephone or at a neutral venue in the parent's community. Lead parent interviews asked about the training and resources; what they had gained from facilitating events for other parents; and perceptions of how useful events were for other parents. Community partner interviews asked about any feedback received from participants and observations of any change in career and education pathway discussions with parents and students.

Surveys of event participant parents (total n=18) comprised of multiple choice and short answer questions sought to capture parents' new learnings and understandings of post-year 10 education options compared to their understanding at the beginning of the project. Lead parents provided parents who did not feel comfortable completing a written survey with support to complete the survey. Focus groups (n=2) of 5-7 people including both lead and participating parents were conducted to supplement the results from the surveys. They were conducted at a neutral venue in their community that parents felt comfortable attending and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

Survey responses and transcripts from interviews and focus groups were analysed manually using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012), with themes drawn from the literature supplemented by any additional themes that emerged from the data.

Results

The key findings are described according to the main themes which emerged: Parents Matter improved parent knowledge and confidence to support their children's post-year 10 aspirations; establishing projects which engage parents takes time, small groups can make an impact, and program design features which engage parents.

Improved parent knowledge and confidence

The events organised by the lead parents were deemed to be highly successful by community partners including schools and industry representatives.

> *[The parents] created two big events, one each year that the program ran, which were about engaging parents with their children in what happens after grade 10. So, whether it was education pathways, training pathways or work pathways... that was all driven by the Parent Matters program, which is something that we probably would have liked to have done but wouldn't have had the time to put together to that extreme, to that level of support for this community. [Community Partner H]*

> *The career and health expo that the group organised this year... it was a great event. It really was. And that model that they put forward is going to be shared with a couple of [senior secondary] colleges that said, 'we really like the way that you did this, can we copy your model of how you went about organising and inviting in'. [Community Partner N]*

Participating parents who attended the events were better informed about educational pathways for their children so they could support their own children. Parents shared how much

their own knowledge of education pathways available to their children had improved through participation in the program in the focus groups and surveys. One parent commented that this was 'the stuff I needed to learn. [It had] changed so much from when I was in year 11 and 12 myself.' And another said 'It's just incredible. There's so many more options [than when I was at school]'. Many lead and participating parents said that visits to the senior secondary and university campuses were of particular value. There was a general feeling of surprise of what the senior secondary colleges had to offer and excitement about this being an option for their own children:

> *I just was astounded at how good [the college's] facilities are and how we went through when the children were there, or young adults, and they were all in the cafeteria and they were all sort of well-behaved... I was totally amazed by it. [Lead Parent B]*

And

> *When we went through [the] college[s], that absolutely was what was needed as far as I'm concerned. So, how to get information about the courses that they hold. Certainly, a lot of the other parents were pricking their ears up, basically. They were starting to realise that there was a bit more out there where they could seek information from, but they certainly haven't... [Lead Parent F]*

Others reported that their preconceptions about university pathways not being an option for their children (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012) were challenged by visiting the campus:

> *Where perhaps, when I was younger, I wouldn't have thought about university. I don't know, no one ever thought they would go to year 12... whereas I now certainly think they need to go on with further education, get some qualifications behind them and then go ahead.   [Lead Parent G]*

Parents shared how their confidence had grown in being able to understand the choices being faced by their children, and that now they felt able to advise and support them in their choices, for example saying: "*It was good that I was able to talk the same academic language with my daughter*" [Lead Parent E].

The benefit of targeting parents with children in years 5-8 was confirmed:

> *It's changed also the way I'm approaching their high school choices. I was really worried about that when he was going into grade 7 and had to make those choices. He had to remake those choices again this year, going into grade 8. And having gone to the colleges, having gone to the university, having spoken to all these people, I felt so much more comfortable with him being able to make these choices. [Lead Parent D]*

And

> *If I just reflect on myself eight months, nine months back, I was worried about my daughter's education... now I know what is ATAR, what is VET, what she is going to do, what is Level 3 of the subject... I know now much, many things about my daughter's future. [Lead Parent E]*

When it comes to better informing parents about education pathways for their children it is important to note that not all parents are familiar with the Tasmanian Education system. Whilst all parents needed help understanding changes and new pathway options that may not have existed when they were in school, some parents have no experience of the Tasmanian context and lacked the local knowledge to assist their children (Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014). One parent who had recently arrived from overseas spoke of her experience trying to access information to help guide her daughter:

When [my elder daughter] was in grade 9, I was really worried what to do. Because if it's in my country, it was really easy for me because I can easily relate my education process and things… subject choice, is all new. I started asking others, parents whose children are in grade 11 or 10, how you chose your subjects? But I was unable to get the clear answer for my daughter. [Lead Parent E]

Another parent, despite having lived in Tasmania for some time, had no knowledge of how the senior secondary system worked:

I'm a South Australian, and I had no idea that some schools didn't go to year 12, so it was a very big shock to me to come to Tasmania and realise, when I asked people if they ever did year 11 and 12, they'd quite often answer that, 'No, I didn't go to college' and that just confused me for years. [Lead Parent A]

The findings in this section reveal that parents had not only more information, but also improved navigational capacity (Gale & Parker, 2015b). They reported being able to imagine a previously unfamiliar future for their children studying in an urban environment, and being more confident in supporting their children as they navigated post-year 10 education pathways.

Establishing projects which engage parents takes time

Whilst it could have been expected that parents would quickly take advantage of the opportunity for sign on for free training and to attend events aimed to enhance their understanding of educational pathways and how to better support their children, in practice, this was not the case. Community partners were quick to share that it takes time to encourage parents to join programs like Parents Matter:

Parents were actually very pleased to be invited and to know that there were events like that. However, a lot of our parents, it takes a while for them to actually take up an opportunity like that. So, the first time they'd only say no. The second time they might think about it and the third time they might go. [Community Partner B]

Lead parents reported similar experiences recruiting for events they organised for parents:

It was hard getting the parents to actually say, 'Yes, we're coming'. They'd discuss it and talk about it and say, 'Yeah, sounds like it's a good idea', but wouldn't really get completely on board. They wouldn't sign up straight away. [Lead Parent A]

Parents Matter project specifically targeted parents from communities with a lower socio-economic background but one community partner noted that across all communities 'it's still really, really hard to connect with parents. Another community partner was emphatic when pointing out that this type of 'slow take-up' needs to be considered when planning a project like Parents Matter. This community partner stated that there was a need for a project like this to be conducted over a longer period of time and that successful outcomes could be achieved through working with small numbers: 'it's small wins and it does take a while to get the numbers and to get things going'.

The finding that it takes time to establish a project such as Parents Matter appears to be related to targeted parents' limited experiences with post-year 10 education and other life-context variables such as family socio-economic factors (Fischer et al., 2017; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Woodrow et al., 2016). This finding confirms that there is more to consider than geographic factors when engaging rural parents in programs about their children's education and career pathways. Socio-spatial factors must also be addressed (Appadurai, 2004, Gale & Parker, 2015a).

Small groups can make an impact

Thus, small groups have the benefit of putting parents at ease, encouraging them to participate in events and workshops and events that will help them develop a better understanding of post-year 10 opportunities for their children, but with support, small groups of parents still have the capacity to create events designed to reach more parents in their own communities.

This research highlighted that small numbers of parents do not necessarily limit the impact a project can make in communities. One school leader reflected that the small group of parents involved were able to deliver two "parent-expo" events for their community over two years that were highly successful:

> In the first year, I was a little bit sceptical because of the small number of parents that put their hand up to be involved in the program. But the first year, we initiated the parent expo. And in the second year, we grew it. And so, I suppose I learned that the power is not in the numbers but it's in the enthusiasm that the people bring. [Community Partner H]

Similarly, a community partner commented on the success of a career and health expo held at a community centre which was organised by four lead parents. Two senior secondary colleges who had taken part in the expo as exhibitors expressed a desire to copy the model used by the lead parents to organise the event, confirming that event quality is not limited by the number involved in its design and delivery.

Some events planned and delivered by the lead parents attracted only small numbers of participating parents, unlike the expos. However, community partners and participating parents spoke of the impact the small groups had on parent knowledge and confidence to support their children's aspirations. For one community partner the choice to target a small group of parents was intentional: "*The most important thing was that we didn't go big. So, we didn't want to have 25 people here, it wasn't about numbers. It was about ensuring that we had the right parents involved*". [Community Partner T]

It was the small group format that assisted parents to feel comfortable not only to attend an event or workshop, but to have the confidence to share their experiences or ask questions so they could build their own knowledge and understandings of educational pathways for their children. One community partner involved in a parent workshop followed a visit to the university campus reflected on the power of the small group:

> We only ever wanted a maximum of ten people involved in… the workshop we ran this year that we then took them to the university for a visit. And so, because they're small, it's more intimate. Therefore, you get that direct feedback from those parents about, 'I felt really comfortable doing this' or, 'I only came because it was a small group'. So, they're more willing to actually share with you because it was such a small targeted group of people that we made feel really, really comfortable. That their ongoing feedback to us is about how much more they know now. [Community Partner T]

Feedback from the parent participants further highlights the central role small group settings play in delivering positive outcomes for parents: "*For me just going to the uni was a big step. The small group worked really well for me*" [Participating Parent A] and "*It was a great day. Small structure of people was excellent – not overbearing*" [Participating Parent B]. The small group events appeared to provide the parents with skills to support academic socialisation of their children (Emerson et al., 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Taking a whole of community perspective in tackling parental engagement, rather than individual parent perspective, allowed the program to draw on social capital networks to reach out beyond the small groups to other parents in the communities (Cuervo, Chesters & Aberdeen, 2019).

Program design features which engage parents

Two key program design features which helped engaged parents to better support their children's aspirations and attainment were delivering programs for parents in community settings, and appointing a facilitator with excellent knowledge of pathways, skills to engage parents and community partners, who was also an accredited VET trainer.

Community settings: Community settings had several advantages. They are close to where parents live, reducing travel time and costs particularly for rural parents, *"people wouldn't travel to [city] to go to it. No"* (Lead Parent C). One community partner acknowledged that there was a greater need for parents in rural communities to access current information about educational pathways for their children and that being able to deliver this in community was key:

> *I think it's very important to actually have it delivered in a community, especially a rural community. Because I suppose by default, the percentage of students that go onto further education is a lot lower than what you'd find in an urban environment. …and it is difficult to get that information to parents that ongoing learning is there, and it is available. And I suppose for them to feel empowered to encourage their children… it is about trying to break that cycle [of not going on to further study]. And definitely, having the outreach so it actually comes to the area is really important. [Community Partner L]*

Venues such as neighbourhood houses and community centres and libraries are part of parents' everyday life and are an alternative to the school where parents may not feel comfortable (Webb, Black, Morton, Plowright, & Roy, 2015; Woodrow et al., 2016). Whilst the schools were partners in this project, Parents Matter deliberately chose to deliver the training away from the school itself. Many of the people interviewed commented on the benefits in choosing community settings other than the school as spaces within which to deliver the training component associated with the program but also as spaces to deliver their events for parents. A strong sense of spaces that were familiar, non-threatening and where people already felt comfortable was a common thread:

> *There's a lot of value of bringing in parents as peers and linking parents to community or, and business. And I think that's a space that people outside the school can do very well to support the school and add value, rather than placing additional pressure on school or it being seen as a totally school thing…I think that's probably the strength of it. I know it was heavily supported by the Neighbourhood House and I think it's much easier to be in the community, and people can come along and feel less threatened. I think school can be a very daunting place for many parents. So, I think the community involvement is the key to success. [Community Partner S]*

One lead parent talked about how empowering she found the experience – particularly in being able to organise a parent expo for her children's school's parent body, but independent of the school. Her words also speak to the benefit of delivering programs for parents in non-school community settings:

> *If I might say what I actually gained from the expo personally, I had to interact with my school on a different level. I've always been a parent. But you get the feeling, from a school, you're a parent - we will tell you what we want you to hear. You can come and help us as much as we want you to. But you're still a parent. You're not part of the school. You're just a parent that we let in. And you get that a lot from the school. And then I had to approach the school [as part of the project], as promoting the expo, to try to get it out to the students' families. And so here I am approaching the school that know me as just a parent, on a professional level. [Lead Parent D]*

The findings above demonstrate how the program acknowledged that some parents had a lack of confidence in education settings. It drew on community-place attachment that is a strength of

rural communities, but can also be a factor that works against participation in post school education away from the community (Webb et al., 2015). The parents were comfortable in the program's community settings, and reported benefits from participation.

Facilitator as trusted connector: Parents and community partners alike attributed much of the success of the project to the facilitator. The facilitator was a qualified VET trainer who was able to communicate effectively with community partners, schools and industry partners as well as building trust among parents in the disadvantaged communities:

> *I thought, I'll go the first day and have a look and see and the I'll probably, you know, disappear. Everybody that went the first day was there 'til the end. So, I think that's a credit to [Facilitator]. I think she made it really relaxed and feel confident that we could, that it was going to be achievable, what we were going to do was not beyond the realms of what we could do. [Lead Parent A]*

The facilitator had an excellent knowledge and skills base and the ability to engage adult learners:

> *I don't think it would have been anywhere near as good without [Facilitator]... We were learning about how to hold meetings. We were learning about how to communicate with people... And the expo took what we had learned a bit, took it further, but in such a different form [Lead Parent D]*

The facilitator was able to connect with parents and tailor information to their needs:

> *When I came here, my mind was full of questions about my daughter and her subject choice. And today when I'm sitting here, I'm fully satiated. Full. I know each and everything, what's going to happen in college. What is she going to do, where is she going, how even she is going to get the bus. I know the campus. I know the people around. And that's just because of [Facilitator]. [Facilitator's] been fantastic support throughout the time. [Lead Parent E]*

The facilitator's ability to work alongside the communities was a factor contributing to Parents Matter's successes.

> *[Facilitator] and I worked very closely together. So, she was very conscious of the local context of the parents that we work with, and how best to run particular programs. So, a particular workshop that we ran about university pathways was to target the parents who we knew wouldn't be engaged normally. And so, [the Facilitator] was really mindful and conscious of making sure that what she came to deliver fitted the cohort of parents we were working with. [Community Partner T]*

In summary, the facilitator acted as a bridge, connecting parents, community partners, education providers and industry. She created an effective platform where parents were comfortable to come together to learn and share experiences to develop new knowledge of education pathways and how to access information to confidently support their children's post-year 10 pathway choices (Bok, 2010; Epstein, 1995). The facilitator was key to parents' improved navigational capacity and ability to support their children as they made post-year 10 pathway choices.

Discussion and conclusion

The Parents Matter program focussed on building parent knowledge and confidence to enhance the quality of 'parent-derived' social capital (Cuervo, Chesters & Aberdeen, 2019) in influencing young people's post-year 10 education pathway decisions. It drew on an understanding of educational aspiration as culturally (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and socio-spatially (Appadurai, 2004, Gale & Parker, 2015a) embedded, to develop practical strategies to provide

parents with information and confidence to actively engage with their children as they made education and career pathways choices.

Parents Matter was effective in that it provided parents with new knowledge and access to resources and information in a safe, engaging and informative way, and which parents reported enabled them to better support their children's aspirations and educational attainment. Parents are well placed to deliver parent information programs that engage parents in their children's education and career journeys. Their status as fellow parents assists in designing events that appear accessible to other parents and deliver information in a format that responds to parent circumstances and needs. Lead parents spoke a similar language to other parents and drew on their experiences of trying to support their own children's educational pathways. Community-designed and delivered events are customised for that community. Parents and their children can access information together, which may not have been possible if they had had to travel outside of their own community to attend. This suggests that the program went some way toward aligning parent and school social and educational cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gale & Parker, 2015a). It addressed both geo-spatial and socio-spatial factors to inform and support parents as their children developed their educational aspiration (Appadurai, 2004; Gale & Parker, 2015a; Gale & Parker, 2015b).

Given that many communities, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, report they struggle to engage parents, it is overly simplistic to suggest that parents in disadvantaged communities are merely discouraged from participating in education pathway events because of their own educational experiences and attainment. This research has highlighted that projects aiming to engage parents in disadvantaged communities around education pathways must first seek to understand the community they are operating in and walk alongside its parents to design programs. Establishing trust takes time, and often parents need to hear about others' experiences before they will participate. For projects that have finite timelines, there is a temptation to see slow uptake as a project failure. Reflections from community partners suggest otherwise. The time it takes to build trust and confidence with target parents must be taken into consideration in planning. While the first year saw only small numbers of parents undertaking the training component of the model, positive feedback delivered through word-of-mouth led to increased participation in training in the following year.

There is power in delivering programs in community settings other than the school. Neighbourhood houses, local libraries and community centres offer neutral spaces that may act to counteract the anxiety some parents have in engaging with schools (Woodrow et al., 2016). Delivering programs in the community, with schools as a partner in the process, sees schools working alongside parents, rather than being the driving force. This can take pressure off schools, which have many demands on their time. Parents can create events that are legitimised by the school and value add to existing career programs.

This research also highlights that highly successful parent information events can be delivered by small, highly committed and appropriately trained teams of parents. Even with small numbers, the parent designed events, targeted specifically to the context of their own community, reached many more parents who developed their knowledge of post-year 10 pathways and confidence to have discussions with, and support their children. Having a facilitator who can train parents to plan and deliver events and link them to industry and post-year 10 education providers as well as schools was key to the success of Parents Matter. The facilitator should not only be a trainer, but also be able to act as a kind of translator, to interpret for and connect parents, schools, other education providers and industry in a way that is mutually beneficial.

Looking forward, there is much potential to transfer not only the Parents Matter program, but also key features identified in its success, to other communities. Program resources and formats

should not only be up to date, but also customised for the particular demographic, education and industry profile of target communities. Practitioners, schools and communities aiming to increase parents' abilities to support their children's education aspirations, should deliver targeted programs in community settings that respond to the context and needs of that community. Facilitators should act as bridges between community, industry, schools and parents so they can better understand each other to address the gap between parental aspirations and parental knowledge by linking parents to expert knowledge and quality resources.

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