Rural Parents' School Choices:
Affective, Instrumental and Structural Influences

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Abstract

The paper discusses qualitative findings from an in-depth study of the school choices of 65 parents living in rural and remote areas of Tasmania and their views about the need for their children to move out of the area to pursue education at secondary and post-secondary level. A constructivist analysis of open-ended survey questions and focus group discussions formed part of a broader mixed-methods approach and probed the affective 'subtext' of instrumental survey responses. Findings contribute to our understanding of the interaction of affective, instrumental and structural factors influencing rural parents' educational decision-making in the neo-liberal policy context, especially with regard to decisions perceived by parents as 'risky' with respect to their own future employment and financial expectations. External threats to rural livelihoods, such as economic downturns and natural disasters create parents' feelings of anxiety about children's educational futures and are experienced differently by those living on farming properties or in small rural towns. Parents' perceptions of local and urban school availability, access and quality differ by locality and region. Educational outcomes reflect multidimensional structural, socio-economic and cultural constraints shaping school choice. Membership of voluntary associations, which provides supportive informational networks and develops shared social capital, appears to help parents to overcome socio-economic inequalities and improve their children's prospects of educational success. The interplay of social class, gender and place attachment is examined with reference to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and disposition, as well as the processes by which parents try to transmit intergenerational advantage through educational choices.

Keywords: Rural parents, school choices, affective, instrumental, structural

Literature Review

Tasmania's traditionally low post-compulsory educational participation rate (Australia Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017) is influenced by high levels of rurality and disadvantage, as measured by a range of socio-economic indices (ABS, 2011, 2012). Dispersed population and scarcity of resources, combined with the demand for specialist education at the post-secondary level, led to the concentration of Year 11 and 12 secondary colleges in the cities of Hobart, Launceston, Burnie and Devonport (Phillips, 1985). Attendance introduces rural students to urban culture, ideas and opportunities but draws them away from family, longstanding friends and close-knit rural communities, something felt most keenly by indigenous and island students (Lehman, 2008; Stewart & Abbott-Chapman, 2011). The historical and psycho-social culture of isolation in many Tasmanian rural and island communities, separated by both distance and terrain, widens the rural/urban gap and accentuates perceptions of 'nearness' and 'farness' compared with mainland

states (d'Plesse, 1990). Tasmania's aging population, slow population growth and rural decline creates tension between young people's out-migration and pressure to keep them in their communities and in Tasmania (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, & Jetson, 2014; Corbett, 2007a; Eversole, 2001). Artefacts and photographs collected in rural History Rooms, run by volunteers, vividly convey the active social and sporting life lost when local rural industries close, employment opportunities dry up and families leave the area (Johnston, 2009; Johnston & McManemy, 2013). Despite Tasmania's improving socio-economic indices, rural/urban inequalities persist.

International research has highlighted the influence of parents' socio-economic status, education, aspirations, beliefs and values on their children's educational participation and achievement (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016; Davis-Keen, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012; Lamb et al., 2015; Lareau, 2011). In Tasmania, students' school attendance is not generally restricted by school 'zoning'. Parents choose schools which they believe will deliver the best education for their children, influenced by memories of their own schooling, their family and social networks, as well as 'official' information. Parents with low educational attainment, poor educational experiences and more restricted social networks are less able to negotiate their way through the educational system than more educated parents and are more severely limited by practical and financial disincentives of living 'in the bush' (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, & Jetson, 2014; Bok, 2010). The role of voluntary organisations such as the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA) requires further study. Such organisations, are parents' communities of practice (Vincent, 1997; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Members are interested in furthering their children's education by sharing information, values and social networksthat may help to reduce educational inequalities created by parents' social class.

 Neo-liberal policy tends to stress parents' responsibility for their children's educational aspirations and overlooks the extent to which historical, geographical and socio-economic factors constrain parents' and children's educational choices and aspirations (Angus, 2012; Doherty, 2007). These factors include physical and social access to education and training options, job markets and transport (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2014; Choate et al., 1992.; Godden, 2008; Morgan & Blackmore, 2007). All rural communities are not the same. Community history, geography and activity infrastructure produce different educational outcomes for young people that are reflected in local migration patterns over time (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2007; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Le Grand, 2003). The intersection of social and locational inequalities leads to complex configurations of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990). In this context, the challenges parents face in seeking to optimise each child's educational opportunity is daunting and stressful.

Parents' feelings alter, directly or indirectly, their perceptions of 'rational' probabilities of future risk or advantage of school choices that require their children staying or 'going away' for education (Davidson, Scherer & Goldsmith, 2003; Slovic, Peters, Finucane, & MacGregor, 2005). Therefore it is important to study ethnographically what Lareau (2011) calls the 'micro-interactional processes' between parents and children and the ways in which, either consciously or unconsciously, parents position their children for educational and social success. Do rural parents adopt a (middle class) 'concerted cultivation' approach and consciously expose their child to a variety of social and cultural experiences and competences that are highly evaluated by society? Or do they allow their child a more (working class) 'natural growth' childhood with little active parental intervention, in which each child's happiness is paramount? (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The extent of parents' willingness to see their children attend school out of the local area, with associated emotional and financial costs, reflects these dilemmas. The management of

social and spatial distance, as part of these family interactions, plays a dominant role in educational choices through which status seeking and conformity are maximized (Akerlof, 1997).

Rural parents' school choices are also influenced by community history and traditions that inculcate over time a collective place consciousness, shared culture and pride (Hooks, 2009; Jetson, 2005, 2009; Johnston & McManamey, 2013). Rural and rurally isolated residence, as both a locational and socio-cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998, 2002), links the culture and meanings of place with the preservation and transmission of identity and embodied dispositions of culture and social class. The subjectivities and social actions of class form part of the habitus and reflect the fluid uncertainties of the late-modern risk society (Beck, 1995; Bauman, 2001). However, the assumed incompatibility between place attachment and educational mobility is not always evident in the 'imagined futures' of young people and their families (Evans, 2016; Jamieson, 2000). Rural family futures are particularly vulnerable to external threats of national and global economic fluctuations and natural disasters, such as bushfires and floods. Communities respond differently to such events with anxiety, apprehension and fear, as well as coping, resourcefulness and resilience (Caldwell & Boyd, 2009). Such emotional responses cut across traditional social class lines and highlight the dynamic, temporal and spatial factors shaping rural parents' school choices.

Research Aims

Our research aimed to investigate attitudes of Tasmanian parents living in rural and remote areas to their children moving away from the area to attend secondary school or college and to examine the factors that influence parents' school and college choices. A related aim was to investigate the association between the strength of parents' sense of belonging to a small, close-knit community and their degree of acceptance of their children pursuing post-compulsory education away from home. The aim of the qualitative analysis discussed here was to probe the 'subtext' of parents' quantitative questionnaire responses.

Design of the Research

We used mixed methods of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Cresswell, 2008). Methods included an anonymous questionnaire survey, containing closed choice and open-ended questions, and focus groups of survey volunteers. In this paper, we present findings from the qualitative analysis of focus group discussions and written comments on the survey questionnaire. Quantitative survey analysis has been published (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston & Jetson, 2014).

Methodology

Research sample
Our sample of rurally isolated parents was purposeful (Cresswell, 2008), recruited through the Tasmanian Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA). This Australia-wide voluntary organisation, founded in 1971, is a non-profit, apolitical parent support group with about 4,500 members (ICPA, 2013). The ICPA represents and lobbies for the educational interests and concerns of families living in rural and remote areas. It is a socially diverse group and includes members from a wide spectrum of occupational and educational backgrounds. All 107 member-households of ICPA Tasmania were invited to participate; of these, 65 members across all branches completed the questionnaire—a response rate of 60%. The majority of respondents were mothers (72%).

Respondents represented a cross-section of Tasmanian ICPA members. Tables below show the diversity of the survey sample. Parents lived in five regions (Table 1). The majority of those living in the Central/Midlands region lived on properties and farms, while the majority of those living on the North East and East coast lived in or near small country towns. There is a highly significant correlation between the two variables.

Table 1: *Region and type of residence of respondents*

Region	Residence		
	Town	Farm	Total
West/North West	5	0	5
North East/East	11	6	17
Central Midlands	9	30	39
South	1	2	3
Islands	0	1	1
Total	26	39	65

Table 2 shows the length of time that respondents had lived in their area. The majority of respondents (65%) had lived in the same area for over 20 years. Period of residence and type of residence were not correlated. Many farming mothers started living in the area after marriage. In addition, the majority (65%) of respondents' or spouses' families had lived in the area prior to the respondent and family settling there. Of these, 13% had lived between 30 to 59 years in the same area, 27% had lived between 60 to 89 years, and 25% had lived over 90 years in the same area. Half of the families had lived for three or more generations in the same place. Parents living on farming properties and in or near country towns were equally long-settled.

Table 2: *Time respondent has lived in the area*

Personal Dwelling Yrs	Residence		
	Town	Prop/Farm	Total
1 to 9	4	3	7
10 to 19	5	10	15
20 to 29	9	14	23
30+	8	11	19
Total	26	38	64
Wt. Ave.	2.81	2.87	

Table 3 shows the highest level of education or training achieved by survey respondents and reveals that 38% of the respondents had a tertiary qualification. The mothers had a higher level of education than the fathers (42% compared with 28%). This may explain the higher proportion of female than male survey respondents. A third of the fathers had left school at the end of Year 10, formerly the end of compulsory schooling. Female respondents living on farms had higher education levels than those living in or near towns.

Table 3: *Respondents' level of education by gender*

Level of Education	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yr10	6	33.3	9	20.0
Yr11/12	4	22.2	12	26.7
App/JobTraining	1	5.5	1	2.2
TAFE/VocEd	2	11.1	4	8.9
Tertiary Qualif.	5	27.8	19	42.2
Total	18		45	

Data collection

The questionnaire survey included questions about place, type and length of residence, children's and respondents' education and strength of feelings of belonging. Parents were asked about their expectations for their children's education, about benefits and drawbacks of rural living, and about their reaction to children leaving the area to continue education. We investigated the influence of parents' sense of 'belonging' and local 'place attachment' in relation to *their* degree of acceptance of *their children* 'learning to leave' (Corbett, 2007a, 2009). We also studied the locational and cultural contexts shaping parents' attitudes to student mobility in terms of changing settlement patterns over time and development or decline of local labour markets. (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston & Jetson, 2014). Qualitative analysis of written responses to open-ended survey questions and semi-structured focus group discussions provided deeper understanding of quantitative data.

The focus groups and their geographical locations

Nine mothers participated in the focus groups. Some fathers regretfully declined to take part because of work commitments. Discussions, combined with the analysis of written responses to open-ended questions, provided rich and sometimes unexpected insights, despite the small number of participants. We chose to hold the focus groups at Cobham in the Midlands and Seabourne on the East coast after consultation with the focus group volunteers. The town names are fictitious in order to protect participants' identities. Some participants travelled long distances to get to the meeting place. Five participants met in Seabourne and four in Cobham. The meeting at Cobham was held in a reception centre at a local café; the one at Seabourne was held in a local community centre.

Both Cobham and Seabourne are small rural towns with less than 900 inhabitants, a significant travelling distance from Hobart, the capital city, and Launceston, the second major city. At the time of the study, Cobham had a rural district high school teaching Years K to 10 with a focus on vocational education, to which students travelled from surrounding areas on school buses. Seabourne had only a primary school so some students travelled nearly an hour each way to the nearest government high school. State government extended schooling to Years 11 and 12 in a number of rural high schools from 2017, in order to improve post-Year 10 retention, including the two high schools mentioned. Both Cobham and Seabourne have been subject over time to fluctuating economic cycles common to towns servicing primary producers, along with flow-on effects to small businesses, banks, shops and professional services that have reduced local employment opportunities, recreational facilities and schools. Relative physical isolation has been reduced by improved transport and communications, but the impacts of information technology developments and increased tourism ventures have not yet been fully realised.

Women participants may have felt encouraged to talk more freely because two of the three

researchers were women. We explained that we had lived and/or worked in rural areas in Tasmania. This increased empathy and mutual trust between participants and researchers and assisted our interpretation of data (Charmaz, 2014; Barbour, 2007). Seven participants had lived in both town and country for some of their lives, when growing up or for education or work, and appreciated the pluses and minuses of both rural and urban living. Parents meeting in Cobham were all outlying farm dwellers. Only one of the Seabourne participants lived on a farm, the others lived in or near the town and they or their partners worked in rural industries, services or tourist businesses. Participants gave permission to tape the conversation. Both discussions were relaxed and lively, each lasting nearly two hours.

Data analysis

Focus group analysis probed the subtext and interior meaning of parents' questionnaire responses, using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Thematic analysis of focus group transcriptions involved close reading, manual coding, subsequent team discussions and multiple readings as part of an iterative process and researcher reflexivity (Charmaz, 2014). We listened to the tapes accompanied by field notes recording the respondents' tone of voice and body posture. Fine-grained analysis consisted of coding each question in a process of constant comparisons with the transcripts. In keeping with the 'complexity' of analysis of rich data, we paid attention to the use of language and the order and strength of feeling with which reasons were given (Barbour, 2007). This strategy focused on identifying both instrumental and affective forms of expression. After we stopped relying on pre-conceived data categories, we were able to ground the meaning of individual choices in the context of their lived experience. We listened to the recordings again after we identified and discussed preliminary themes in order to confirm emotional depth and meaning conveyed by particular words and phrases, in conjunction with the written transcripts. We then re-examined the written questionnaire comments after being sensitised to sub-textual meanings by the focus group analysis. This allowed participants' meanings to be fore-grounded rather than our preconceptions as researchers (Charmaz, 2014).

Ethical statement

The questionnaire survey and focus groups were voluntary and anonymous. The towns in which the focus groups were held have been de-identified in order to protect participants' anonymity. The privacy and confidentiality of participants were respected at all times. The research was approved by the Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania Network) of the University of Tasmania.

Results

The context of choice: School structure, policy and change.

The parents surveyed, of diverse backgrounds, were aspirational – they valued education for what it could do for their children, especially in helping them to get a job. Nevertheless, they had to overcome geographical and social access barriers in order to achieve their aspirations. Survey responses showed that parents hoped their children would achieve a higher level of education than they themselves had achieved. Parents with no post-Year 10 education wanted their children to go to Year 11, 12 or beyond and to 'do better' than they had done. Over half of the participants hoped for a tertiary qualification for their children. The choice of secondary school that would facilitate the transition to Years 11, 12 and tertiary education, either academic or vocational, was crucial. Survey findings showed that 83% of respondents' primary age children attended the local government primary school. At secondary school (Years 7 to 10), the proportion being educated in rural government schools had reduced to 47%, compared with 53% attending Independent and Catholic schools away from home. At the senior secondary age

(Years 11 and 12), 14% were attending an urban, government secondary college or Technical and Further Education college, compared with 72% in private or Catholic education, and another 14% had left school. Overall, the majority of children of all ages had attended a local rural school for at least part of their education, mainly at the primary level. Parents in both groups said that rural, government primary schools generally provide a sound education with excellent teachers. The affective word 'caring' was mentioned several times. A typical comment was: *"We like the small local primary school, with smaller classes, friendly atmosphere and plenty of community involvement."*

Secondary school choices reflected more instrumental concerns. In focus groups, parents spoke of secondary and post-secondary education opening up new horizons, providing their children with more employment options and exposure to a wider diversity of people and occupations than was found locally. However, survey findings revealed regional differences in parents' educational aspirations, irrespective of family size and parents' own education levels. Qualitative data suggested these differences reflected socio-economic circumstances, family and community social capital and the local job market. The rise or decline of regional industries and employment opportunities, including in primary production, influenced parents' school choices. Parents' also wrote that they were concerned about the availability and quality of local rural high schools in terms of teaching, curriculum and student behaviour. Parents agreed, in discussion, that their choice of secondary school was influenced by these structural factors. The majority of Seabourne focus group members preferred to send their children to local government schools if these schools reflected urban standards. The majority of Cobham parents said they preferred their children to go to school in Hobart, either government or private, and to learn from the city experience.

At the time of survey, the state government made radical changes to the post-Year 10 institutions and pathways, both academic and vocational, in order to improve post-compulsory student retention (Rodwell, 2011). We asked parents about their knowledge of these changes and how they might affect their children. Findings showed that 60% of parents knew *'not much'* or *'nothing at all'* about the changes, nor how these changes would affect their children. In focus groups, they said they felt cut off from 'top down' and urban-centric decision-making. Those changes have since been reversed. The state government's current intention is to extend Years 11 and 12 in rural community high schools. Continuing public information and community consultation will be needed to ensure changes are effective. Parents said they valued current information about the education system in order to make informed school choices. *"We have diverse aspirations and opinions but only limited options for our children's education and we need more information about those options"*, expressed a general view. *"All rural people are not the same but people in town who make decisions think we are. There's just as much diversity among families and communities in the bush as in the town."* There was also a feeling that policy makers were out of touch with the sorts of education and training rural people need or want. *"You'll find that town people have very different ideas about what they think we think - very different!"*

Parents acknowledged that membership of the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA) was helpful in becoming informed and dealing with those in authority who they thought tended to stereotype rural families as all having lower aspirations for their children's education. One parent wrote on the questionnaire: *"I once heard a district superintendent say publicly that rural education doesn't matter, as few kids go on to do anything."* Further examples of deficit views of rural families were given in focus groups, and naturally, parents were annoyed. Particularly frustrating was the high turnover of staff in relevant government agencies with which rural parents have to deal. *"It's a bit like a yo-yo isn't it? You get something and then they take it away from you and then you get it back again"*; *"with ICPA … you go to see the person that's in power at*

the time and you get them to understand where you're coming from and there's a change of government – we're back to square one". Participants acknowledged that some rural parents *"don't care much about their kids' education"* but felt they were in a distinct minority. The Cobham parents expressed *concern* for the limited educational choices of rural parents who were unemployed and receiving government welfare. The various kinds of government financial assistance, such as Youth Allowance, conveyance allowance and living away from home allowance, were agreed as important for all rurally isolated parents, whatever their circumstances.

Managing spatial and social distance
Parents' choice of schools was greatly influenced by the cost and availability of transport and suitable accommodation if students needed to live away from home. Participants from the Cobham group talked of the difficulties of sustaining private travel, even with car-pooling, when there were limited public transport options. One parent commented, *"you just can't keep doing it all the time"* in terms of financial running costs and time commitments as well as the resulting fatigue for parents and children. Most parents regarded bus fares as expensive and timetables and bus routes as sometimes inconvenient for rurally isolated students. Seabourne focus group members repeated, *"our main thing is transport"*, *"that's a transport thing again"*. Transport problems forced some parents, against their wishes, to send their children to school in the city to a private boarding school, government boarding school, college with hostel or boarding with relatives.

Access to means-tested government financial assistance affected school choice of parents of diverse social class backgrounds. One participant said, *"Without student financial assistance, you haven't got a choice. If you can't afford to send them, then they just can't go."* Farming parents in the Cobham group said they suffered from being asset rich but income poor, especially in times of drought. This affected their children's eligibility for government Youth Allowance. One father wrote on the questionnaire: *"Having a farm, usually owned by the bank, doesn't mean you've got money. We came close to stopping our kids' further education because Youth Allowance had stopped."* Eligibility through means and asset tests for farming families was an issue about which ICPA lobbied the Commonwealth Government (Godden, 2008; ICPA, 2013).

Perceptions of 'reasonable' daily travel distances seemed relative to the child's age, home locality and actual or perceived remoteness from the nearest country town (d'Plesse, 1990). Parents in the Cobham group, who lived in more remote localities with difficult access to local schools, more frequently chose either government or private high schools in Hobart, despite the distance. One mother explained: *"It takes them so long to get to the district high school on the school bus, with all the stops along the way to pick up students, it doesn't take much longer for them to travel to a high school in Hobart, where they get a better education."* These parents also chose schools where they felt their children would learn from richer curricular and extra-curricular activities and more diverse occupational role models than were available locally. This reflects what Lareau (2011) calls 'concentrated cultivation'. Some families involved actively with the local school were known to have moved house so that their children could attend city high schools. These are examples of ways in which parents try to shorten social, as well as geographical, distance (Akerlof, 1997). These moves depleted school and community, *"The ones that probably could push the school along a little bit, all leave, and… the cycle goes around again which is a bit hard."*

The pros and cons of online 'distance' education were discussed animatedly in both groups. Parents felt it was good to have the option available for those who do not wish their children to travel long distances or board in the city, but that: *"it shouldn't take away [from the ones] that choose to go away, or want to go away … those parents shouldn't be disadvantaged and have their*

isolated children's allowance taken [from them]." Parents felt limitations tended to outweigh the advantages. One parent observed: *"Online learning as it is run now is failing many students and does not engage them sufficiently with face-to-face support. I think truancy and many other issues for rurally isolated kids are often due to boredom and lack of direction. Rural kids are hands-on kids and their education should take account of this."*

Individualisation, class and gender

Parent aspirations for their children's education at the secondary and post-secondary level reflected the influence of instrumental considerations. In the focus groups, mothers said that exposure to diverse experiences and options was of prime importance that would help their children to get a job and 'do well' in life, irrespective of whether a vocational or academic pathway was followed. Discussions revealed the implicit middle class assumption that education would position their children well in society by enlarging their social and cultural experiences (Lareau, 2011). The practical reality emerged as more complex and was related to number, ages and gender of the children involved.

Rural families tend to be larger than average. Our sample was no exception. Between them, the 65 families had 179 children – an average family of 2.75 children. Only three families had one child, 23 had two, 28 had three, nine had four and two had five. The children's ages ranged from primary to 'mature' age and the choice of school for each one clearly came along at different stages in the family cycle. Therefore, it is not surprising that parents found it difficult to generalise on the questionnaire about their aspirations for their children's education. A quarter of mothers and 17% of fathers said they could not answer this question because *"all children are different"* with different personalities and capabilities. In exploring this finding, focus group participants stressed that most parents want their children to be *"happy"* and to be educated in ways that will make them happy, which Lareau (2011) suggests is a working class, less interventionist approach. This affective influence upon parents' decisions reflects close-knit rural family and community bonds, and an increasingly child-centred culture of individualisation (Beck, 1992). One father commented on the questionnaire: *"We didn't choose our son's school – he chose it himself!"* Parents also said they were keen for their children to achieve broad learning goals, rather than merely academic 'performance' goals, and to develop new skills, understandings and self-confidence to fit them for an uncertain future (McWilliam, 2008). These findings suggest that affective and instrumental influences worked differently in different situations depending on degree of perceived future 'risk'.

Parents judged how each child would be affected by long hours of travel or living away from home, in school or private boarding or government hostel, at least during the week. One parent pointed out that not all children within a family are keen to move away from home. *"Our two children have very different reactions to living away from home to attend school. While they both accept it – one loves it but the other one can't wait to return home and to the local community."* Another parent was concerned about the special needs of a child with a disability, and what would happen at the end of schooling. Mothers also said that they saw their sons' and daughters' educational futures differently. Seabourne group participants talked of the traps of boredom for children staying in a country town with little hope of skilled employment. *"The girls have got nothing to do, don't have any interests, and it's such a big emphasis on having a boyfriend, and their whole life is about having a man in their life … and then at the end of the day the marriage splits and there's this woman who doesn't know how to bank her own money."*

Cobham group parents were keen for their daughters to have opportunities beyond the *"girly things"* they were expected to do when they were young, so that they could take an active role in the rural economy. Farming parents stressed the need for both girls and boys to gain a

qualification: *"Farming is a terrible gamble. If they want to come back to work here they should at least have a fall back position."* A qualification such as an Agriculture Science degree was considered as important for a daughter as a son. *"There's no reason why a girl can't run a farm."* Parents' affective responses to the 'gender gap' in skilled employment in rural areas also reflected the cultural change that accepts the possibility of women running the family farm. This biographic evidence suggested rural families are experiencing the blurring of 'traditional' sexual identities associated with globalisation and the changing nature of rural work that implies the displacement of traditional hegemonic masculinity (Corbett,2007b; Gorman-Murray, Pini, & Bryant, 2012; Kenway, Kraak, & Hicky-Moody, 2006; Luhrs, 2015).

Family livelihood, security and risk: School choices in uncertain times
Family fortunes change over time socially, financially and geographically. These influence decisions on each child's educational future in terms of birth order and number of siblings. Parents' school choices must be seen within the dynamics of the family cycle impacted by external events. The research was conducted following Tasmania's worst drought in 75 years. In the survey, 67% of farmers said that their expectations for their children's education and future employment had been affected by rural economic downturn and drought compared with 28% of those living in or near a rural town. Regional differences reflected this – 63% Midlands, 35% North East/East. There were no significant gender differences. Written comments explained responses with reference to costs of senior secondary schooling, the uncertainty of farming 'succession' and the need to plan for alternative futures. *"Our children need to pursue a career in an industry other than primary production."* Focus group discussions showed managing economic stresses took considerable effort and emotional reserves. It also meant finding practical alternatives. Out-migration is more feasible for those with town-based occupations if they have transportable skills. For those whose livelihoods are tied to the land, sometimes over generations, or whose tourism or other businesses depend on specific locations, physical 'place attachment' limits mobility. Corbett (2007a) draws the distinction between 'mobility capital' and capital that is less transportable.

We, at first, assumed that straightened family finances meant parents were downgrading their aspirations because of the costs of city education, whether government or private. Written explanations and focus group discussions revealed alternative readings. Firstly, it appeared that the stresses increased the parents' belief that their children should leave the locality for education to improve their chances of finding employment elsewhere, with the option of returning to live and work should circumstances improve. Secondly, farming parents saw the need for their children to gain qualifications for employment other than farming, especially when farm income could not support all children on the farm. Comments included: *"One of our children is anxious to pursue a non-farming job due to the drought"; "Insecurity of farming life highlights the need for alternative farming options."* Thirdly, parents demonstrated changing priorities, such as for private boarding school and re-organising family finances to make plans happen. One mother wrote: *"I have saved since marriage to be able to afford my children's education. If I hadn't it would have been extremely difficult and probably meant splitting the family".* Another said: *"You can't muck about with children's education. They don't get a second bite at it."* Corbett (2009) has observed similar responses.

One East coast town participant, self-identified as a low wage earner, wrote that her family had been faced with the tough decision of one parent staying to work in the rural area and the other moving to support the children at school: *"I would've been forced to move. It may have been a half move, but it would have split the family."* Other written comments included: *"I don't think these things affect your values and goals, education is essential"; "Children need a qualification, because there's no knowing what's going to happen down the track" "We have prioritized our finances to*

ensure our children can attend school in town to gain the best chance of a career option other than farming." In discussions, mothers were emotional because they believed their children's education was worth fighting for, despite dilemmas of moving, leaving, returning or staying. In the words of one Seabourne group participant, *"we've all been in that boat, we've all had to struggle with do we go, do we stay... We don't want to move. Our children don't want us to move."* Farming mothers in the Cobham group felt this most keenly. The bushfires of January 2013 severely damaged some farming properties, including those of one or two ICPA members. Media reported farmers vowing to stay and 'fight' to restore their property. Affected famers have done this over time since the drought broke and with improved prospects in the farming sector.

Place attachment, habitus and parents' school choices

Parents' survey comments were positive about where they lived, despite insecure rural livelihoods and distances from education, employment, sporting and cultural opportunities. Strength of belonging to the local area reflected these findings. As many as 70% rated their sense of belonging as 'strong' or 'very strong', 20% said 'fairly strong' and only 9% said it was 'not strong'. Surprisingly, neither gender, level of education, region nor number of years of residence was associated with strength of belonging. However, there was a highly significant correlation between strength of belonging and type of residence. Farming parents were twice as likely to say their sense of belonging was 'strong' or 'very strong' than those living in or near a town. The association between sense of belonging and living and working on the land has been noted elsewhere (Stewart & Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

Mothers explained why they felt a strong sense of belonging with reference to the benefits of living in or near a caring community, intergenerational sharing, social cohesion and reciprocity, especially at times of hardship. The Cobham mothers talked of children building self-reliance, responsibility and coping skills through fishing, shooting, riding, camping, and helping on the family farm. Most valued was the sense of security in a place where community members *"look out for each other"*, particularly for those *"doing it tough"*. The Seabourne group emphasised advantages for children living in a safe, familiar place where *"everyone knows everyone"* and children have *"freedom to do what they want to do"* under the watchful eye of neighbours.

Significant gender differences did not emerge from our original coding of survey comments on the benefits of rural living. Alerted by focus group discussions, we 'read' again in greater depth both the first and second listed benefits and realised the gendered subtext. While 40% of mothers mentioned specifically the benefits of community and family support, only 11% of fathers did so, instead choosing to make more general statements about 'rural lifestyle'. Conversely, 39% of fathers mentioned the benefits of outdoor activities and working with family members, compared with 27% of mothers. Mothers seemed more focused on the affective aspects of 'micro-social interactions' in the rural community that produce trust, values, relationships and mutuality of social capital (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000), while fathers seemed more focused on the practical and instrumental aspects of living and working in a rural area. Typical mothers' responses included: *"Safe place, supportive family networks, small caring community. Kids mix with the older generation and are unable to avoid responsibility"*; *"Social, family and life values which country living brings with it."* Typical fathers' responses included: *"Living on a farm we learn to appreciate all aspects of life and our children see firsthand how we make a living to support ourselves now and in the future"*; *"This is where we earn a living so the children learn about the business we run, they learn about hard work and learn to become independent."* One might speculate that for these mothers, the rural habitus (Bourdieu, 2002), as locus of embedded customs, tastes, dispositions, relational practices and ultimately identity, shaped *what you are*, for the fathers it shaped *what you do*.

This complex social reality helps to explain the finding that parents' strength of belonging was unrelated to their reaction to their children moving away from home for education. The majority of parents with a 'strong' or 'very strong' sense of belonging 'accepted' or were 'pleased' for their children to move away for education. Interestingly, 28% of fathers were 'not keen' compared with 13% of mothers. More educated mothers said it was something you had to accept if you want your children to be "*happy in the long run*"; "*We have to accept kids having to move away for education and work*"; "*Kids are keen to move away, and keen to come home*"; "*Town people think country people are very attached to where they live, they're resistant to sending children away to school, but we haven't found that at all. There's just this acceptance.*" Other focus group participants went further and said they were pleased their children, especially daughters, would have opportunities they didn't have. "I know if our daughter had stayed here, there is no way she would have achieved what she did"; "*This is going against everything that you're hoping I'll say, but I hope my daughters don't come back straightaway. I want them to experience life.*" Mothers in this sample appeared to try to balance 'concerted cultivation' with 'natural growth' (Lareau, 2011).

Discussion

Findings show that rurally isolated parents' school choices express their aspirations for their children's educational and occupational futures. These aspirations reflect parents' socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and also the specific characteristics of the place in which they live. Even relatively advantaged parents, as in our study, are constrained by the geographical, historical, activity infrastructure and labour market conditions of place. These conditions include availability of, and access to, education and training institutions, and government financial and practical assistance that helps shrink physical and social distance. Parents' school choices take place within the ever-changing landscape of state and national government policies, through which parents' try to chart a pathway. The way in which policies are implemented locally, by reflecting deficit or asset views of rural families, may affect parent reactions and children's educational outcomes. Surveys deliver statistical results, but the meaning of those results is not always clear. Our constructivist grounded theory approach to qualitative data, in probing the meaning of the statistics, has allowed parents' voices to be heard. What they have said is sometimes unexpected and raises many questions for further research.

School choices, and the affective and instrumental influences which they reflect, take place at the micro-interactional level of parent and child relationships and are patterned in ways that seek to make the most of their children's future life chances (Lareau, 2011). This is the process by which social and cultural capital are transmitted and inequality perpetuated. This process takes place within the habitus as a system of embodied dispositions, tastes and practices that organise the ways in which individuals perceive the social world and react to it (Bourdieu, 1990). Middle class parents seek to manage their children's socialisation within the habitus through choice of school, whether private or government, and the 'concerted cultivation' of tastes, skills and experiences in and out of school. In this way, they manipulate the physical and social distance (Akerlof: 1997) between rural and urban spaces. Working class parents are less able to do this.

Though numbers are too small to draw conclusions, the research raises questions about these Tasmanian parents' parenting styles which appear to combine concerted cultivation and natural growth approaches with the individualisation of children's educational biographies. Other studies cited in this paper explore the tensions between the pull factor of strong place attachment and the push factor of young people seeking education and employment elsewhere (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston & Jetson, 2014). The evidence of changing parental attitudes to formerly gendered education and employment identities raises questions about ways in which the rural habitus is capable of change, including gendered change. Sweetman (2003) asserts that if the

concept of habitus is not to appear deterministic it must allow for personal agency, reflexivity and self-transformation. Sweetman suggests the concept of a 'reflexive habitus' which is conscious rather than unconscious and in which there is habitual adaptation to a changing social environment of uncertainty and risk. This applies to the situation of these Tasmanian rural families.

Viewed at close quarters, parents' choices look less clear-cut, more volatile and more subject to external forces of global risk than retention statistics convey. All choices are risky in the late modern, risk society of fluid relationships and identities (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992). However, the findings tentatively suggest that risk may be experienced more acutely by rural families, especially farming families, living in locations vulnerable to global economic fluctuations and environmental risks. The degree to which increased participation of rural children in post-secondary and higher education is able to mitigate rural vulnerabilities, without contributing to population decline, deserves further research.

Findings suggest complex rural narratives and biographies, which do not always fit neatly into expected categories. If we are to understand better the urban/rural differences in Tasmanian post-compulsory retention we need to take account of dynamic contexts and structures as well as individual subjectivities and choices (Brannen & Nielsen, 2005).

Limitations of the study
The parent sample is small and limited to Tasmania. Findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. Further research is needed in other geographical contexts to test whether findings are more generally applicable. In addition, the sample consists of parents who have an active interest in their children's education, by virtue of their membership of ICPA. It is likely that problems they experience would be magnified for parents who do not have the support of such an association. Questions of ethnicity and Aboriginality were not included because of the small number of study participants and risk of identification in an otherwise anonymous survey. These questions would need to be included in a larger survey.

Conclusion

Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions and survey participants' written comments has uncovered the 'sub-text' of affective, instrumental and structural influences on rural parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's secondary and post-secondary education that are expressed in the 'text' of retention statistics. Findings also reveal the framework of rural choice constraints that "structures the perception of the world; as well as action in that world" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81). Although economic and educational indicators are improving in Tasmania, inequalities remain in rural socio-economic development, employment growth and diversity. These inequalities reflect and perpetuate rural prosperity or decline, and education and training participation beyond the compulsory years of schooling. Given the complexity and disparity of the socio-economic and spatial contexts in which rural parents earn a living and make educational choices, it is clear that a concerted whole-of-government strategy to broaden education and training options within the context of overall rural and regional development (West,2013) will be needed if rural post-compulsory retention rates are to be improved.

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