

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL AND REGIONAL SCHOOLING AND STUDENT RETENTION

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Abstract

Student retention in school until the successful completion of Year 12 is an acknowledged challenge in many parts of Australia, particularly rural and regional areas. The research reported here focuses on community involvement in rural and regional schooling and student retention. The data were collected as part of a three-year ARC Linkage study of issues associated with completion of school education to Year 12 in rural, regional and disadvantaged parts of Tasmania. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with rural and regional community leaders across Tasmania. This paper reports on three aspects of the research: the type of involvement of the organisation that the interviewees represented, the motivation for the involvement that took place, and concerns about initiatives. A two-dimensional framework was used to classify the 108 activities in which the participants reported being involved. One dimension documented the type of organisation that the participant represented and the other focused on the type of activity in which participants were involved. The range of specific activities was broad, as was the range of reasons that motivated the involvement. Outcomes of the research provide benchmarks for other studies in similar Australian or international rural and regional communities where student retention is an issue.

Introduction

The context for this report is the community in which schools are located and in which its children are educated. The issue considered is related to retention of students in school beyond the historical leaving age of Year 10, with the aim of successfully completing Year 12 with a qualification. This issue is particularly salient in the Australian state of Tasmania, which has the lowest Year 12 completion rate of all states and the Australian Capital Territory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). Further, the rate is lower in rural and disadvantaged regions than in the major urban centres (Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, 2011).

Although there are studies that report students', parents', and teachers' views about the community influence on education in their environment (e.g., Sanders, 2001, 2003; Sheldon, 2003, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) and studies based on the building of social capital through involvement with community networks (e.g., Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Semo, 2011; Semo & Karmel, 2011), less has been written about the community's views about its place in the education milieu and opportunity to assist in issues associated with students staying in school. Gregoric (2013) addressed this issue based on a study in South Australia where community members were interviewed as part of two extensive case studies, which also considered the perspectives of students and school staff. Gregoric considered the patterns of community involvement with schools, the positive and negative aspects of the experiences, and how effective interactions were. Related to the current report, Watson et al. (2015a)

considered the range of 20 issues raised by at least one of the fifteen community members interviewed as part of the larger study. The issues were specifically related to a protocol that asked about views on importance of retention beyond Year 10, barriers to higher retention levels, and possible ways to improve retention rates. This report further analyses the data from the interviewees, focusing on the specific initiatives relating to retention, the interviewees' motivation to have their organisations involved in initiatives, and any concerns that were expressed about the initiatives.

The definition of community is at times contested (e.g., Corbett, 2014; Fendler, 2006), especially in rural and disadvantaged areas where education may not be as highly valued as in the cities. Acknowledging this diversity, the interviewees' views reported here are from people who represent the part of the community that support education as a means of contributing to the overall prosperity of the community.

The Current Report

This paper arises from data collected as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage project with the Department of Education Tasmania. It is part of a series of papers reporting on students (Beswick, Hay, Cranston, Watson, & Allen, 2012; Cranston, Allen, Watson, Hay, & Beswick, 2012; Watson et al., 2013, in press), teachers (Beswick, 2015), parents (Hay et al., 2016), and case studies (Cranston et al., 2016). The paper continues analysis of the interviews of fifteen community members described in Watson et al. (2015a), which revealed a number of themes associated with student retention in rural and regional areas. The strongest theme was the provision of educational pathways for students. The focus of the current analysis is on the involvement of the community members with the schools in their local areas, their motivation for involvement, and their concerns about the initiatives.

One way of gathering evidence of the community's potential influence is to canvas community members themselves about the specific networks, activities or initiatives in which they take part that, in their opinions, contribute to student retention in school. Sanders (2001) offered a model to follow in this regard by suggesting a two-dimensional framework classifying the focus of the activity by the type of community partner involved in some specific network or activity. For her research, Sanders used four possible foci: student-centered (e.g., provision of scholarships and student mentoring programs), family-centered (e.g., parenting workshops and family counselling), school-centered (e.g., donation of school equipment and classroom assistance), and community-centered (e.g., art and science exhibits and community revitalisation and beautification projects). These were classified across eight community partner types. These foci were used by Watson et al. (2015b), reporting the involvement of other community members in the study who answered an earlier survey. That analysis found 275 activities in which 77 community members were involved. It was hence of interest to look for confirmation of community involvement from another sample of community members.

Batson, Ahmad, and Tsang (2002) suggested four motives for general community involvement: *egoism*, servicing the community to benefit oneself; *altruism*, servicing the community to benefit individuals; *collectivism*, servicing the community to benefit a group; and *principlism*, servicing the community to uphold moral principles (pp. 434-439). Although their work is not specifically on students' retention and schooling, it gives a framework for categorising the motives of the community members in the current study. In a report more specifically in relation to schooling (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2010), four main, often overlapping, reasons are given by schools for forming partnerships with business and community groups, namely: (1) to improve student engagement, (2) to improve academic outcomes for students, (3) to enhance the social wellbeing of students, and (4) to broaden vocational options and skills. These reasons would appear to fit within Batson et al.'s altruism and collectivism motives. These broader conceptions of motivation, in general for the community, of which schools are a part, and from the opposite perspective of schools themselves, provide background sources for consideration when the motives of the community members themselves have been analysed.

In Gregoric's (2013) analysis of school-community interactions she identified both facilitators and barriers to the goals of the community, including personal relationships among the key players

(community members, teachers, students, and school leaders), recognition of school level policies and practices, and recognition of policies and practices acceptable in the community and its organisations. The actual activity introduced and the social and/or political context is also likely to have an impact in relation to the initial goals of the organisation. Overall, nearly half of the 48 community members interviewed by Gregoric experienced “some difficulty” and/or found it “challenging” to work in the two case study schools. Although interviewees in the current study were not asked specifically for barriers to their initiatives, occasionally these were mentioned. It was considered of interest to document these as well as the positive outcomes discussed.

The research reported in this paper addresses the key questions:

1. What are the specific activity foci of the interviewees and how do they compare with the Sanders (2001) sample?
2. What are the motivations for the communities’ involvement with schools?
3. What concerns are expressed about their organisation’s involvement with schools?

Methodology

Sampling

Following the analysis reported in Watson et al. (2015a), extracts from the 11 interviews, 10 with individuals and one with a group comprising five members, were further analysed. The interviewees were specifically employed in positions within the community rather than with the Tasmanian Department of Education: four were local councillors or employed by councils; three were consultants; one of the consultants was also an advisory board member, as was one other; one was an authority chair; one was a federal government regional education and employment officer; and the group of five people represented a non-profit support organisation.

Instrument

The complete interview protocol, consisting of a list of questions supplied to the participants before the interview, is provided in Watson et al. (2015a), as are the details of the interview setting and procedures followed before and after. Of interest to the current paper was the question asking for “specific initiatives relating to student retention ... school-based, departmental, or community-based” (p.15).

Analysis

Sanders’ (2001) framework was used to document the foci of the activities in which the interviewees were involved. Participants were classified into three types for the analysis: local and national government, non-profit organisation, and consultants and board or authority members. The approach identified the number and type of activities members of the community were involved in that they believed impact positively on student retention. The motivation for this involvement was determined by analysing the 11 interview transcripts and extracting themes from the comments made. Sixteen themes were identified and significant quotes are presented from participants with respect to their motivation for involvement. At the same time any concerns that were raised related to the involvement were noted and these were combined into five groups.

Results

The results are presented in three parts in relation to the research questions: (1) Focus of the activity, (2) Motivation for involvement, and (3) Concerns regarding the viability of activities.

Focus of the Activity

The participants were associated with 108 specific activities across the four activity foci (Sanders, 2001) as outlined in Table 1. The activity focus with the most instances of community

partner involvement was *student-centered* ($N = 36$), followed by *school-centered* ($N = 29$), *community-centered* ($N = 27$), and *family-centered* ($N = 16$). Local/national government partners and consultants/board or authority members constituted the most numerous groups in the study (both $N = 5$). The former engaged in 72 activities (the largest number) and the latter engaged in 20. The non-profit organisation engaged in 16 activities, about 60% more than the overall mean number of activities per community partner of 9.8.

Table 1
Type of Community Partner (N = 11) and Type of Activity in which Engaged

Community Partner	Total		Activity Focus							
			Student Centered		Family Centered		School Centered		Community Centered	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Local/national government ^a ($n=5$)	72	67	19	26	13	18	23	32	17	24
Consultants/Board or Authority members ($n=5$)	20	19	11	55	1	5	4	20	4	20
Non-profit organisation ($n=1$)	16	15	6	38	2	13	2	13	6	38

^a Includes City councillors ($n = 3$), a Federal Government Regional Officer ($n = 1$), and a Council Youth Development Officer ($n = 1$).

The activities in which participants engaged varied across the activity foci and the community partner group. For some of the programs mentioned by interviewees the type of activities involved in the program related to more than one activity foci. Where this occurred the research team agreed on the most appropriate activity focus to ensure the program was only counted once.

Student-Centered Activities

Student-centered activities of local/national government partners included the funding of youth workers; the provision of student scholarships for academic, sporting or extra-curricular activities; homework clubs; provision of music and performing arts activities for young children; the North West Action for Youthⁱ initiative; the Youth Network of Tasmania;ⁱⁱ the Youth Council program;ⁱⁱⁱ Pulse Youth Health service;^{iv} provision of alternative education for struggling youths; the Kommunity Kids program;^v learner-driver mentor programs; and the Billy project.^{vi} Education-based initiatives for disengaged youths were also mentioned, with the proviso that “the right kind of people do it so that we’re not disengaging [the students] any further” (City Councillor C).

Three of the consultants/board or authority members mentioned provision of work experience as a student-centered activity, noting the positive impact this type of experience can have on students: “I think it’s probably because in Year 10, it’s the first real opportunity that they have to experience what a workplace is all about” (Consultant A). Other activities included mentoring programs, student scholarships and bursaries, participation on mock interview panels to help students with their interview techniques, providing students with practical experience in landscaping and gardening, and collaborative programs with local Police and Community Youth Clubs.^{vii}

The non-profit organisation reported involvement in a number of student-centered activities such as Project Hahn,^{viii} career transition programs and career counselling, the Workplace English Language Learning program,^{ix} and other literacy- and numeracy-based programs linking students with local businesses to facilitate workplace learning. The members of the group commented on the importance of “linking literacy and numeracy to what’s relevant to young people and the future,” thereby raising self-esteem as the students finally “latched onto literacy and numeracy.”

School-Centered Activities

Local/national government representatives reported 78% of the 29 school-centered activities. Three of the five local/national government partners mentioned the Dream Big Project^x designed to help students to transition from school to work. One participant commented on the importance of links being made between schools and local businesses, suggesting the program was “encouraging

people in the workforce to come and actually integrate, and talk and show [the students] all sorts of things” (City Councillor B). Another commented on the benefit of the program in terms of career pathways:

We [are] now working on the Dream Big Project, which is getting to Grade 5 kids and starting in terms of what careers might they be doing and what pathway would they need to take to get there ... [I am] not saying that [in] Grade 5 they’re going to decide what career they are going to have, but it gets them starting to think in general terms. [City Councillor A]

Other school-centered activities of local/national government partners included being a member of a school association; attending school meetings, functions and prize-giving ceremonies; providing general and financial support for learning activities and initiatives; and supporting industry-school partnerships.

Three of the five consultants/board or authority members mentioned school-centered activities. These included forming school-community links, mentoring school leaders, and providing professional learning for teachers. The non-profit organisation mentioned two school-centered activities: the Study, Training, Employment Pathways program (which is no longer operational) and the Sea Ropes project.^{xi}

Community-Centered Activities

Community-centered activities included, for local/national government representatives: community development programs and partnerships (e.g., Making Burnie 2030,^{xii} Burnie Community House,^{xiii} and Bridges out of Poverty^{xiv}); business/school partnerships; and the Burnie Community Learning Campaign,^{xv} “an umbrella campaign ... adopting a positive attitude just to learning” (Council Youth Development Officer). Consultants/board or authority members mentioned school-community partnerships and community engagement, as well as links with the University of Tasmania (e.g., the University Preparation Program^{xvi}). The non-profit organisation mentioned six community-centered activities: Aboriginal Community Links,^{xvii} local community partnerships, school-business-community partnerships, community development, the Community Blitz program,^{xviii} and the development of interagency support panels (e.g., to assist and support youths released from the Ashley Youth Detention Centre).

Family-Centered Activities

Family-centered activities were less varied, with many community members across the three community partner groups mentioning the state-wide Launching into Learning program,^{xix} and programs for young mothers (e.g., Steps to the Future,^{xx} and the Young Mums’ program^{xxi}). Other programs included the Bringing up Great Kids program,^{xxii} education-based programs for single parents, parent forums, and programs to address parental attitudes to education.

[The Family-School and Community Partnership Bureau^{xxiii}] is about the whole family and the child to get the best out of their education. ... The Bringing up Great Kids program for parents and carers of children ... specifically relates around age 6 to 12 and it’s a train-the-trainer model. ... We are also targeting, through our Steps to the Future program, young mums because we’ve got a lot of teenage pregnancies. ... getting them into the school with their child and then giving them opportunities to go back in and start their education again. [City Councillor C]

Launching into Learning, is really great to actually get those early years ... as a foundation to get that right through the education system ... that’s an exciting area, and we should be able to see some really good outcomes, maybe in 10, 12 years time. [Federal Government Regional Officer]

Many of the participants were in agreement that tackling issues surrounding student retention required more than just a school and/or student-based approach. The belief that parents are an integral part of the solution was evident throughout the interviews, with one city councillor stating:

Another one of my firm beliefs which I'm trying to filter through my council is that you just can't ever deal with one part of the child. ... They're a whole package and their family has to come around that. [City Councillor C]

Motivation for Involvement

Analysis of the 11 interviews revealed 16 themes for motivation related to involvement in activities and initiatives to increase school retention. These are listed in Table 2. More than one motivating factor was noted in each interview, ranging from two for one of the consultants to eleven for the non-profit organisation group. The mean number of motivational themes across the community members was 5.7. Quotes associated with the seven most commonly voiced motivations are presented.

Table 2
Motivational Themes Influencing Involvement in Initiatives (N=11 interviews)

Theme	Number of interviews in which theme was raised
Specific Employment	7
Improved future prospects due to increased level of education	7
Parental attitudes, improving parental education, and intergenerational issues	7
Community attitudes to education	6
Importance of education in and of itself, and long-term benefits	6
Economic benefits due to increased retention rates	5
Personal, social and mental health and wellbeing	5
Early intervention	4
Shared community responsibility	4
Fostering life-long learning	3
Teenage pregnancy and young mothers	2
Alternative pathways and teaching methods	2
Whole-community benefit	2
Student support	1
Keeping young people in Tasmania	1
Offsetting negative influence of peers	1

Employment and Improved Future Prospects

The themes of employment and improving future prospects for students were each voiced in seven of the eleven interviews, often in conjunction. A number of issues were noted, including meeting the needs and expectations of employers, skilling young Tasmanians for future employment, and tackling the growing unemployment rate, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities.

I think [it is important to work] with employers as well, to help them to understand that this is their future workforce, so therefore they might have some obligations in that whole "community to raise a child" type thing. [Council Youth Development Officer]

Another interviewee noted that higher levels of education can influence one's thinking about employment:

...the more you drive them to be educated, the more they will want employment [so] I want them to have an education. [City Councillor C]

In terms of future prospects, one participant commented about employment:

...even though there's been a huge improvement over the last couple of years, I know that we're still below the state and national averages. That's a concern, because as I said, that's our future that we depend on. [City Councillor A]

Parental Attitudes and Intergenerational Issues

A commonly voiced motivation for involvement related to the perception that some families in rural and regional areas lack an appreciation of the value of education. Comments included:

I think most of the barriers ... are external to the students ... [it can be] from the family or particular part of the community they come from, where there's just a low aspiration or a devaluation of [education]. ... There is still a segment and it's a fairly large section of our community that come from fairly disadvantaged circumstances, probably had poor educational experiences themselves, and there's not a culture of valuing education. [City Councillor A]

An associated reason for involvement related to generational factors, particularly long-term unemployment, that potentially impact on student retention.

We've got fourth or fifth generations of no work – nobody has ever worked in that household. Where do they get their want and desire to actually go and do anything? That's why you have the community houses springing up because that's a linkage ... [City Councillor B]

Community Attitudes to Education and its Importance

Improving community attitudes to education was mentioned in six of the eleven interviews. Some noted “the lack of value of education” (Federal Government Regional Officer) while others noted that “a whole of community approach to value education is a key aspiration [as] schools shouldn't exist ... in isolation” (Non-profit Organisation Group). The importance of education in and of itself, and the long-term benefits of promoting continuing education was mentioned in six interviews, for example, “it's not necessarily good enough to just complete Year 12 ... we're always looking at lifelong learnings” (Federal Government Regional Officer).

Benefits, Economic and Personal

The economic benefit of increasing school retention rates was mentioned in five interviews, with the interviewees commenting on “benefits from there being people who have a greater intellectual maturity entering the workforce” (Authority Chair). These benefits include so “we can remain and be competitive in the Asian economy” (Non-profit Organisation Group).

In five of the interviews, the students' personal, social and mental health and wellbeing influenced the participants' involvement in activities.

I think also in terms of personal and social wellbeing there's real benefits in retention. It's empowering ... Being well-educated empowers you to do lots of things and access lots of opportunities that aren't there if you're not well-educated and therefore retention flows from that. [Consultant and Advisory Board Member]

The long-term benefits to the individual were noted, with one participant commenting that higher education influences “social inclusion ... mental stimulation, and the quality of life” well into adulthood (Authority Chair). Wellbeing was also associated with improved employment opportunities as higher education was seen to improve one's chances of obtaining more satisfying employment.

There's a flow on effect ... in terms of social community benefits ... because unhappy workers are often unhappy people and there are attendant risks for family and relationships. [Advisory Board Member]

Concerns Regarding the Viability of Activities

Analysis revealed five specific concerns about the implementation of programs to address student retention (see Table 3). A single concern was voiced in five of the interviews, with the remaining six interviews containing two, three or four of the concerns ($n=2, 3$ and 1 respectively).

Table 3

Concerns Expressed by Interviewees (N=11 interviews)

Stated concern	Number of interviews in which a concern was raised
Financial sustainability of programs	8
Requiring all students to complete formal education	6
Time investment required	4
Negative reporting of retention	2
Programs not targeting right people	2

Financial Sustainability

Despite the motivation and belief in their initiatives, the financial sustainability of programs was an issue raised by a number of participants, for example related to the university: “The Federal money finishes shortly, and we’re a bit anxious about the university’s capability to continue its investment in them as core business” (Advisory Chair). The members of the non-profit group lamented the loss of funding for key initiatives run by other organisations and government departments, mentioning funds being cut to the Tasmanian Department of Education’s pathway planning and career education program for Year 10 students (Department of Education, 2014a), and other programs such as U-Turn:^{xxiv} “[U-Turn] lost their funding yesterday. That was such an excellent program.” Another participant expressed concern that funding was being allocated inappropriately, not in “a spot that might make a difference” (Advisory Board Member).

It was noted, however, that not all programs and activities required funding in order to succeed. Rather, motivation and a willingness to implement the activity may in some cases be of equal or greater importance.

Requirement to Complete Formal Education

The requirement to complete formal education was seen as a concern. Six felt that it was not appropriate to “force” all students to complete their educations to Year 12 as some students do not fit the formal education model and merely requiring them to complete is insufficient. Rather, investing in alternative educational pathways was seen as a better option.

It’s all very well for you to say to me, we had 200 kids in this school at the end of Year 12 ... but what did they achieve? What are those children going to take away that’s going to be meaningful? [City Councillor C]

...when you’re thinking about trades ... they’ve school-based apprenticeships ... if school doesn’t suit them, they have got an option. [Council Youth Development Officer]

Other Issues

Other participants expressed concern about the need to invest time and energy over a long period in order to change societal attitudes to education.

...if you’re going to shift stuff like this ... you shift it over decades. ... governments have to understand that only by investing beyond the short term, that over two or three decades will they shift attitudes that are deeply ingrained in the Australian psyche. [Advisory Board Member]

Another concern, noted in two of the interviews, was the impact of negative reporting on school retention and the need to focus on positive outcomes and activities that are working.

...when I read the media about what our retention rates are and how they can be better, I just wish there’d be a shift in focus. We need to be thinking about, where’s it working, where are there some good examples of kids being retained in education who otherwise might not have been. Promoting those sorts of stories. [Consultant and Advisory Board Member]

The final concern, voiced in two interviews, was that sometimes the programs they were involved in were targeting the wrong people. While acknowledging the many benefits of these programs and praising the outcomes, there was concern that they were not focusing attention in the right area.

Specifically, the two interviewees stressed the importance of starting early in a child's schooling and focusing attention in the primary and early secondary years.

I think it comes back to starting at an early time. There's no use saying Year 9s and 10s at the moment. We need to be going right the way down. [City Councillor B]

Discussion

The research questions addressed in this paper are based on further analysis of the interviews with community members (Watson et al., 2015a), exploring their views on school retention and specifically related to activities in which the interviewees were involved, their motivation for involvement, and their concerns. These aspects are summarised in relation to other studies and the Tasmanian context.

Activity Focus

From the analysis using the Sanders (2001) framework, the representation in the activity foci of the interviewees was somewhat different than for the community members who were surveyed (Watson et al., 2015b). Proportionally there was more involvement that was family-centered for the interviewees and less that was school-centered than for survey participants. The mean number of activities in which the interviewees were involved was approximately three times the mean of the survey respondents. In comparison with the Sanders data, which were collected from others than community members themselves, and involved more diverse sorts of community partners, Sanders reported much more involvement in student-centered activities (59%) with only about half of the representation in school- and community-centered. This outcome is comparable to the Tasmanian interview data. The results reported here and in Watson et al. (2015b) should provide benchmarks for further Australian research.

The issue of student retention is complex, however, and sometimes the programs and activities mentioned by the participants related to more than one activity focus with an emphasis, for example, on families as well as students or schools. The interconnectivity of the activity foci is not an issue, however, as researchers stress the importance of holistic thinking and collaborative strategies when dealing with “wicked problems” such as retention (e.g., Australian Public Service Commission, 2007; Bore & Wright, 2009; Cranston et al., 2016). The interviewees’ realisation that programs need to consider more than one aspect of the “problem” provides hope that the involvement of the community members will lead to improvements in student retention rates in Tasmania.

Motivation

Completion of formal education to Year 12 has long been evidenced as a key contributor to the economic and social wellbeing of students and their communities (e.g., OECD, 2013) and it is encouraging to learn that this is recognised by the community members in this study. The interviewees’ stated motivations for involvement were wide and varied. Batson et al. (2002) suggested four motives for community involvement: egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism. Although their research is not directly related to student retention and schooling, these terms can be used to categorise the motives of the community members in the current study. It would appear that the interviewees were motivated by a combination of altruism, the benefiting of other individuals, and collectivism, the benefiting of a group, with the students, their families and the community at the heart of their actions. Gregoric (2013) reported a similar finding in her work in which community members wanted the students to be “happy and healthy” (p. 164). She also noted that “community and business organisations may at times be motivated by self-interest ahead of their concern for students” (p. 197). Egoism, however, was not identified as a strong motivating factor in the current study.

In the more narrow field of education than that studied by Batson et al., a related study by the ACER (2010) reported four main (sometimes overlapping) motivations given by Australian schools for forming partnerships with community members: student engagement; academic success; enhanced social wellbeing; and vocational skill development. The ACER report concluded that schools benefited from “the skills, resources, ideas, training, mentoring and support that community and business organisations can offer” (p. 21). These reasons were also shared by the community members in the current study. For example, the Authority Chair’s comment that “these issues of retention, transition, participation, engagement are part of the core business of most of our institutions” is an indication that the community understands the importance of school-community partnerships. The Tasmanian Department of Education is currently implementing a community partnership initiative,

My Education, designed to link schools, students, parents and particularly the community (Department of Education, 2016). Vocational skill development is a stated priority of the initiative, as students can learn from “real-world business and industry experiences” to ensure “our young people are job-ready, resilient and employable.” The interviewees in this study mirrored these aims, with the most commonly stated motivations for involvement relating to employment and the future prospects of rural, regional and disadvantaged students.

Concerns

In relation to the concerns raised by the interviewees about their involvement with schools to improve student retention, the main issue raised was about funding and what happens to an initiative when it runs out. Although finance was mentioned by Gregoric (2013) it did not appear to be a major issue in the South Australian study compared with relationship issues among the participants and policies. It may be that the Tasmanian interviewees were not given a prompt for this type of concern or the interviewees may not have been the people on-the-ground implementing the projects. Although overall motivation for involvement was strong as reported, there was an acknowledgement that personal motivation during a project was important and could cause issues if it lagged. Related to these issues was the realisation that there is no quick-fix to problems associated with retention; it may take a generation or more to change expectations, engagement, and outcomes. Interesting was the comment about the potential negative reporting of Tasmania’s low retention rates rather than a focus on what is being done to improve the figures. This is particularly interesting in light of a recent report on learning and education from the perspective of young Tasmanians (Tasmanian Youth Forum, 2016) in which a key finding was that young people were concerned that there are “often negative attitudes and stereotypes of young people” and that “young people believe negative perceptions of them in the broader community can impact on their education opportunities” (p. 11). Te Riele (2006) supported this notion, suggesting that “perceptions of youth have been biased towards negative aspects” (p. 132). To counter the impact of negative reporting, Haywood and colleagues (2009) referred to “a ‘discourse of improvement’ rather than one of crisis” in which the focus is on the “positive achievements students have already made rather than focusing on the negative aspects” (p. 28). That the interviewees recognised the importance of shifting community attitudes on the reporting of retention rates is a step in the right direction.

Limitations

The interviewees were not randomly selected and hence did not include members of the community that would satisfy Corbett’s (2014) category of wishing to retain the community “as it always has been.” Given the purpose of the overall study to explore and contribute ideas for improving retention, it was not felt productive to search out these members of the community for their views. The higher rate of reported involvement in activities by the interviewees than the survey participants may have been influenced by the different time involved in responding to the two instruments and the preliminary notice given to interviewees. With little evidence of this type of input from the community in earlier research, the input from these people can lay the foundation for comparisons with others more widely dispersed in Australia or interviewed in later years.

Conclusion

One of the positive outcomes in Tasmania related to the realisation of the importance of investment over a long period of time is the “Launching into Learning” program, discussed by several of the interviewees. It was the focus of a recent longitudinal study, which concluded that “regular participation in LiL gives children a significant boost in general development, reading and maths performance ... with LiL children showing improved results through Kindergarten, Prep and (NAPLAN) Year 3” (Department of Education, 2014c, p. 21). Of particular interest to the current study was the finding that “these benefits occur irrespective of socioeconomic background or Aboriginal status, with students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds benefiting most” (p.

21). Another program mentioned by several interviewees was the Grade (Year) 5 Dream Big program (Hansen, 2015). If Launching into Learning is followed consistently by programs such as Dream Big and other later programs then there is hope for positive completion outcomes in Tasmania.

The breadth and variety of initiatives and activities in which the community members are involved provides an indication of the complexity of the issue. As one participant noted,

I don't think there's any one type of initiative that works. It's got to be cultural, and it's got to flow through the institutions and the community and around the kitchen table, that there's value in these things. [Advisory Chair]

Adding to the outcomes reported from the community members in the project (Watson et al., 2015a), this paper has documented 108 activities with which the interviewees had connections. This and the report on other members of the community surveyed (Watson et al., 2015b) gives hope to the general Tasmanian community that student retention rates may increase to some extent as a result. Exploring community involvement in other rural, regional, and disadvantaged communities in Australia and internationally may find similar positive interactions. Thus, this study provides some benchmarks for comparison.

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ⁱ North West Action for Youth (NWAY) focuses on bringing together the wider youth sector to share information, network, collaborate, and form partnerships (<http://www.ynot.org.au/network/regional-committees/nway/>).

ⁱⁱ The Youth Network of Tasmania (YNOT) brings young people and service providers together to identify and respond to youth issues (<http://www.ynot.org.au/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Youth Council program provides young people with the opportunity to learn about how local government works and develop leadership skills (<http://www.burnie.net/Community/Youth/Burnie-Youth-Council>).

^{iv} Pulse Youth Health provides health information and support for young people aged 12-24 years of age (https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/service_information/services_files/pulse_youth_health_south).

^v The Kommunity Kids program offers free after school activities and nutritional food for school-aged children (<http://burniecommunityhouse.blog.com/activities/kommunity-kids/>).

^{vi} The Billy Project aims to bring families, artists, seniors and school staff together to create happy childhood memories and build aspirations for young children. The Project focuses on the pivotal transition time from Prep to full-time schooling. Among other activities, children work with members of the local community to build billycarts (<http://creaturetales.com.au/project/the-billy-project/>).

^{vii} Police and Community Youth Clubs (PCYC) offer a wide range of sporting and recreational activities for youths, providing positive relationships between young people and police (<http://www.police.tas.gov.au/programs/pcyc/>).

^{viii} Project Hahn provides opportunities for young people to participate in outdoor recreation activities (http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/service_information/services_files/project_hahn_incorporated).

^{ix} The Workplace English Language Learning (WELL) program assisted businesses to train apprentices in need of improving their English language, literacy and numeracy skills. Funding for the program ceased in June 2014 (<http://www.industry.gov.au/skills/ProgrammesandAssistance/ClosedProgrammes/WorkplaceEnglishLanguageAndLiteracy/Pages/default.aspx>).

^x The Dream Big program enables Grade 5 students to engage with local businesses and organisations to learn "what they have to do to get where the adults are today" (Hansen, 2015).

^{xi} Sea Ropes is an art-based project designed to raise awareness of the ecological issues and ramifications of discarded rope and refuse on ocean environments (<http://www.lisarudd.com/sea-rope.php>).

^{xii} Making Burnie 2030 is a strategic plan developed by members of the community for the betterment of the city of Burnie (<http://www.burnie.net/Community/Making-Burnie-2030>).

^{xiii} Burnie Community House provides a meeting place for company, advice and support and aims to expand and enhance community networks to prevent social dysfunction, increase community action and involvement, and empower citizens (http://www.burniecommunityhouse.com.au/new_site/).

^{xiv} Bridges out of Poverty is an educational approach that enables employers, community organisations, social service agencies and individuals to address issues surrounding people living in poverty in a comprehensive manner (<http://www.hbpls.com.au/focus-areas/bridges-out-of-poverty.html>).

^{xv} The Burnie Community Learning Campaign aims to increase educational aspiration in Burnie and foster a learning culture (<http://www.humanservices.gov.au/community/government-programs/community-innovation-through-collaboration/burnie-local-solutions-fund-grants>).

^{xvi} The University Preparation Program (UPP) provides an alternative entry pathway into the University of Tasmania (<http://www.utas.edu.au/centre-for-university-pathways-and-partnerships/upp>).

^{xvii} Aboriginal Community Links is an information and referral service for Aboriginal people living in the Launceston region. (<http://www.colony47.com.au/community-development/aboriginal-community-links/>).

^{xviii} Community Blitz provides members of the local community access to meaningful real life learning opportunities and aims to strengthen community connectedness (<http://www.communityblitz.org.au/>).

^{xix} Launching into Learning (LiL) “provides resources to schools to develop and lead initiative with families and their community to support children’s early learning prior to Kindergarten” (Department of Education, 2014b).

^{xx} Steps to the Future, Learning Pathways for Young Mothers Project (Tas.) & Smith Family (Charity), 2011.

^{xxi} The Young Mums’ Program aims to help young mothers to keep in touch with education, have contact with others, and make friends for themselves and their children (<http://www.wattif.net/ymp/>).

^{xxii} Bringing Up Great Kids is a group parenting program developed by the Australian Childhood Foundation for parents who might be considered ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ (<http://www.childhood.org.au/training/bringing-up-great-kids-training-parenting-program>).

^{xxiii} The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau supports schools, families and communities to build sustainable, collaborative, and productive relationships (<http://www.familyschool.org.au/>).

^{xxiv} U-Turn is an initiative of Mission Australia designed to break the cycle of vehicle theft by engaging participants in practical mechanical training while addressing life-skills and personal development issues (<http://www.missionpromotion.com/uturn/>).