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Increasing Students' Social Capital through Community Involvement in Rural and Regional Education

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Abstract

School and community interaction is an important topic in education, as evidence suggests that communities that value their local schools engender more positive long-term outcomes and a strengthening of the social capital for the students from those schools. Although school and community interaction has been explored from the schools' perspective, less research has occurred from the perspective of the key stakeholders and leaders of a community, particularly in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas. The context for this exploration is the Australian state of Tasmania, and the research findings may have implications for policy makers, school leaders, and teachers both nationally and internationally. Eighty-six community leaders and community members from rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas of the state responded to a survey, which included indicating the level and type of involvement they and their organisations had with local schools. The evidence from their comments suggests that community, business, and social leaders can play an important role in building social capital and as advocates for their local schools, as well as being a source of information, advice, and service to schools. In particular, this paper provides a foundation for future research with community members on their involvement in schooling and the impact of this involvement on students' social capital.

Keywords: community, rural education, school completion, social capital, students

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that students' successful completion of 12 years of education is a minimal requirement for economic growth in local, state, and national communities (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). Successful school completion has also been shown to have a positive impact on the well-being of citizens (Beacon Foundation, 2014; OECD, 2013). This paper reports on data collected as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage grant in collaboration with the Department of Education (DoE) Tasmania. The research, which was contextualised in the state of Tasmania, generated findings that are of interest to communities in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas nationally and internationally.

Tasmania is classified as a regional and rural state with pockets of disadvantage (Norrie, Englund, Stoklosa, & Wells, 2014). In the state education system in Tasmania, Years 11 and 12 are generally

taught in schools separate from those catering for the earlier years. Colleges (Years 11 and 12) are located in citiesⁱ, high schools (Years 7 to 10) are in cities and larger regional centres, and district high schools (Years K to 10) are in rural communities. Those completing Year 10, therefore, are at a point where they need to choose to stay on for further education, even though this is likely to mean travel to, and enrolment in, a larger school. Low levels of student retention and completion rates in Tasmania have been well documented (see e.g., Allen et al., 2017; Cranston et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2016b). In 2008, for example, Tasmania had a Year 12 completion rate in government schools of 55% compared with the rate for government schools nationally of 67% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008). Similarly, in 2013, the ABS (2014) reported a national student retention rate of 82% from Years 7/8 to Year 12. For the same period the rate for Tasmania was 69%.

Evidence suggests that school and community interaction can have a positive impact on student retention and completion (e.g., Stone, Doherty, Jones, & Ross, 2011). Further, research on the impact of the community on its school and its students is referenced in relation to the notion of the communities' social capital (e.g., Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Sanders, 2001; Semo, 2011). Social capital is the extent to which physical, social, and personnel resources within a community can have a direct and indirect impact on the school and its students. This paper, therefore, explores the specific involvement of rural and regional community representatives in schooling, which participants hope will improve students' completion rates and ultimately the social capital of students and the community in general.

The Community and Social Capital

The term “community” is a problematic concept, with the question of who or what constitutes a community contested (see e.g., Corbett, 2014; Fendler, 2006). For this study community is a subset of the larger society in which the education of school children takes place. Gregoric (2013) presents a comprehensive history of the use of the term community in the context of a study of community and business organisation involvement with schools in the Australian state of South Australia. In that study, she interviewed community members as part of two large case studies, which considered the patterns of their involvement with schools and their reflections on the experience and its effectiveness. The larger study of which this report was a part was interested in a similar population to that studied by Gregoric. Watson et al. (2016a) followed Gregoric's interview methodology, whereas this part of the study reports on a wider cross-section of the community based on a survey. With this in mind, it is important to recognise that there can be diversity of community observations and opinions in relation to their involvement in rural education, with some community members reflecting a futures-oriented perspective, and others acknowledging that the community may wish to stay as it has always been (Corbett).

There is much literature that considers the impact of communities, particularly in rural and regional areas, on students' aspirations in terms of their education. The concept of social capital underlies much of the research in this area. According to Semo (2011),

Social capital refers to the attributes and qualities of family, social and community networks that facilitate cooperation between individuals and communities. The quality of these networks and the extent to which individuals are engaged with them are believed to have an impact on the educational and social development of children and young people. (p. 1)

This is the background against which the data collected in this study are analysed and discussed. Although the concept of social capital did not underlie the development of the explicit questions and protocols presented to the community members, it is an important concept to consider in

exploring participants' reported contributions towards the educational environment in their communities (Hands, 2008; Warren, 2005).

In the broad field of educational research internationally, social capital is recognised as a significant product of positive collaborative relationships between community groups and students in an education system (e.g., Hands, 2008; Warren, 2005). Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) explored social capital as “*a community rather than individual characteristic that is central to the discussions of social cohesion, citizenship and social development*” (p. 46) and summarised two kinds of resources that contribute to social capital: Knowledge and Identity. Their research, comprising rural Tasmanian Year 10 students, identified three factors influencing students' current priorities and future aspirations: a social factor, including both travelling to see the world and staying near their family and friends; a work factor, including having a job and earning money; and a study factor, including doing well and completing Year 12. Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman also included a Likert scale of students' future aspirations, which produced four factors, one of which was labelled “*Family community career.*” Loading on this factor were items related to “*making a contribution to society,*” and “*living in a good community.*”

From analyses of student data, other authors have suggested that the community has a social capital influence on students' priorities, aspirations, and academic achievement (e.g., Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Hands, 2008; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Sanders, 2003; Semo, 2011; Sun, 1999). Similar data collected from school educators and parents have also demonstrated the importance of being a part of a collaborative partnership, including family and community, to improve student academic achievement and overall engagement in learning (e.g., Hay et al., 2016; Sanders, 2003; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Other researchers have claimed that one of the contributions from the community believed to foster school completion specifically in rural areas is work experience, especially around Year 10 (e.g., Ainley, Malley, & Lamb, 1997; Fullarton, 1999; Rothman, 2004).

A Framework for Community Involvement

Several frameworks have been suggested for examining the types of involvement of families and the community in social structures and organisations. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) in the United States, for example, explored six types of involvement of these two groups. Only one of these, however, related specifically to the community: “*Type 6, collaborating with the community or identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen schools, students, and families*” (pp. 5-6). In relation to behaviour and school discipline, Sheldon and Epstein noted that the use of community volunteers and community mentors was related to improved student behaviour and school discipline. Further, in relation to chronic absenteeism, Sheldon and Epstein reported that bringing in speakers to talk about the importance of completing school, and connecting chronically absent students with a community mentor, were related to improved student attendance.

In her study of community involvement with two case-study schools in South Australia, Gregoric (2013) characterised the involvement in two ways. One way was the type of organisation, which included businesses, cultural or recreational institutions, faith-based groups, government agencies, volunteer organisations, and other community groups and individuals, constituting a sample of 33 organisations. The other way of characterising involvement was based on a continuum created from the degree of involvement with the school. The continuum ranged from peripheral involvement; through information provision, referral by school, duplicated activities, and innovative activities; to integrated involvement. As well, Gregoric canvassed a wide spectrum of difficulties encountered by the community and business organisations, which

included being outsiders, being left to “sink or swim,” absorbing financial cost, missing opportunities, and needing a “sell” in order to market their activities.

In another Australian study, Stone and Hughes (2002) found that the quality of social relations is the critical issue in building social and community capital and that quality relationships positively impact on the capacity of people to come together to achieve outcomes of mutual benefit. Hands (2008), working in Canada, also found that school-community partnerships with secondary school students strengthened students' social capital through the links established with the community. Extrapolating from previous research of Stone and Hughes, Semo (2011) further set the scene for interest in the community by proposing that “[s]ome evidence suggests that the influence of community networks can even help to offset some of the effects of socio-economic disadvantage” for young people (p. 1). Warren (2005) followed this line of argument in considering urban schools in impoverished areas of the United States:

We can think of social capital as a set of links across institutions, like schools and community-development organisations. ... We can ask to what extent institutions in a community collaborate with each other and work together for the development of families and children. Institutions serve as sites for building social capital as they bring networks of people and resources to bear on achieving collective ends. (p. 137)

In following this network approach to improving community involvement and social capital, Sanders (2001) surveyed 443 US schools involved in the National Network of Partnership Schools originating at John Hopkins University to foster “building permanent school, family, and community partnership programs” (p. 22). The aspect of the study germane to the current report focused more directly than other researchers on the community and considered two dimensions of community involvement: one being the type of Community Partner that was involved (similar to Gregoric (2013)) and the other being the Activity Focus. There were four possible foci of the partnership activity being studied: 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). The Community Partner dimension had eight groupings including business, other educational bodies, health and aged care organisations, volunteer groups, faith organisations, and individuals. For 817 instances of Activity Focus across these Community Partners reported by the 443 schools, 59% were Student-Centered, with 17% Family-Centered, 12% School-Centered, and 10% Community-Centered. Of the Community Partners involved in these activities, 45% were businesses or corporations. All other categories of community partners were less than 10% of the total. In a related case study of a single school, Sanders and Harvey (2002) documented 10 community partners involved in 17 activities across the four types: Student-Centered, 7; School-Centered, 6; Family-Centered, 2; and Community-Centered, 2. These reported outcomes provide benchmarks for the current study.

The initiative for the collaboration in the Sanders (2001) study was undertaken by schools in approaching the community partners, and the data were collected via the schools. Before the current Linkage project of which this report is a part, the study of community involvement in schools (e.g., Gregoric, 2013; Hands, 2008; Sanders & Harvey, 2002) has been based on information from schools receiving the support rather than the self-reported interventions by the members of the community. Given that the consensus of the research on social capital is that the involvement of the community has the potential to increase young people's involvement and engagement in schooling (e.g., Hands, 2008; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Warren, 2005),

the data drawn from the current research may offer further insight into ways in which rates of student completion can be improved in rural and regional areas.

Local Background and Research Questions

As part of an Australian Research Council Linkage grant with the Department of Education Tasmania, gauging the beliefs and involvement of community members was one of the avenues employed to explore issues in relation to retention beyond Year 10 in the state. More broadly, Cranston et al. (2016) interrogated case studies and identified three major themes related to retention in the state: sociocultural, structural, and curriculum, teaching, and learning. Twenty-five educators within the state (including the Department of Education and the University of Tasmania) were interviewed (Allen et al., 2017) about the reasons they saw for low retention, and suggested remedies. The themes in the findings were similar to those identified by Cranston et al. from the case studies. Students were surveyed about their educational aspirations (Watson, 2013, 2016b), as were parents and teachers for their children and students (Hay et al., 2015, 2016). Two groups of community members were also involved in the study: 11 who were interviewed face-to-face and 86 who completed a survey. Themes that arose from those interviewed (Watson et al., 2015) included the provision of appropriate pathways for students, the positives and negatives of job opportunities, the responsibilities for the community, and the importance of parents and teachers. The involvement of these community members and that of their organisations (five government bodies, five local consultants or board members, one non-profit organisation) was also documented in the same manner as in the report presented here (Watson et al., 2016a). For the surveys of community members, the questions were divided into two parts for reporting. As well as the analysis presented here, survey questions related to beliefs concerning the community and school retention were analysed separately (Watson et al., 2017).

Research questions

What type of organisations are involved with schools in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas in Tasmania in the context of considering social capital and improving school retention beyond Year 10; and what is the nature of the involvement?

Does the involvement align with or differ from the dimensions of community involvement reported by community members interviewed in Tasmania (Watson et al., 2016a) and by schools in the United States (Sanders, 2001)?

Methodology

Sample

To obtain a sample of community members to represent the views of people with no formal employment association with schools or the state school system, a list was prepared of local governing councils, businesses, service organisations, and voluntary organisations across Tasmania but confined to the rural, regional, and disadvantaged communities surrounding the schools in the larger project (see Watson et al., 2013, 2016b). From this list, 279 emails were sent to organisations or named individuals within the organisations. From this group, 86 (31%) agreed to participate in the study, completing an on-line survey via Qualtrix. One reminder was sent to those who did not reply initially and a paper survey was sent to those who requested it. The sample was thus a convenience sample of community members willing to express their views on issues related to staying in school beyond Year 10 in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas of the state.

Instrument

The survey, in which the items used in the report were a part, was designed to explore the community members' views on the issues that research had identified as important for students

completing school beyond Year 10, as well as to ascertain the level of involvement of the community members in their local school/s. Thirty-three Likert-style questions on the participants' beliefs about issues related to school retention were developed based on other surveys administered to students, teachers, and school leaders. The questions, found in Watson et al. (2016b) for students, were reworded for community members and extra questions were added about the importance of school completion for their organisation, and about the ease with which they dealt with schools. As part of the survey, participants were asked the type of organisation they represented, their highest level of education, and the level of school in their communities with which they were most closely associated. A very general question at the beginning asked participants to *"indicate how well you think members of your business/organisation know the local schools/colleges,"* using four levels of knowledge: (1) Not at all, (2) Very little, (3) To some extent, and (4) A lot. Participants were also asked to indicate which among five choices of general involvement with schools applied to them: work experience, attendance at school functions, goods or services, recreational opportunities, and other. The final question of interest asked participants to give specific information in answer to the following question: *"Please briefly describe the extent/nature of the involvement you and your business/organisation have at the local school/college"*.

Analysis

This report is based on the descriptive data summarising information provided in the survey for the background of the community members and their organisations, and the responses specifically related to involvement with the purpose of enhancing school retention. The approach of Sanders (2001) described earlier was used for these data. For the Community Partner dimension, the information provided on *"type of organisation represented"* was used. Where participants noted more than one Community Partner organisation, the researchers jointly allocated each of the activities to the most fitting organisation; thus each activity was counted only once. For the dimension related to the Activity Focus in which each partner was involved, there were two sources of data: first was the survey item on the type of involvement with schools (reported in Table 4) and second was the item asking specifically for examples on the extent/nature of involvement with schools. These were assigned individually by a member of the research team to the four Activity Foci: Student-Centered, Family-Centered, School-Centered, and Community-Centered. Allocations were checked by another member of the team with mutual decisions made on any discrepancies.

Results

Table 1 reports the numbers from various types of organisations represented (nine people indicated more than one type). The groups of organisations were similar to those reported by Sanders (2001) except that Sanders had no government organisations and the current study had no faith-based organisations. Of the 86 respondents, six did not report their locality. The rest were evenly distributed across the rural and regional areas of the state in the study. The sample consisted of 45% males and 55% females.

Table 1. Type of Organisation Represented (N = 86)

Type	N	(%)
Local or national government	39	(45%)
Business, including Retail (4), Manufacturing (4), Tourism (4), Agriculture (6), Telecommunications (1), electrical contracting (1), and self-employed (1)	21	(24%)
Community-based organisations, including not-for-profit organisations (5), Community/Neighbourhood House organisations (4), other non-specified community sector organisations (3), Youth Worker (1)	13	(15%)
Community service groups, including unspecified community service groups (7), Rotary Club (2), Lions Club (1)	10	(12%)
Education, including retired teachers (3), unspecified educational position (2), editor of peer-reviewed scientific journal (1)	6	(7%)
Cultural & recreational institutions	2	(2%)
Health care organisation	1	(1%)
Other (retired)	1	(1%)
NA	2	(2%)

The highest level of education achieved by participants is given in Table 2. That 76% had post-school qualifications reflects the characteristics of the organisations that were canvassed. To gain an appreciation of the level of schooling with which the organisation was most closely associated in its dealings, respondents were given four alternatives. Of the 75 who responded to this question, 30 suggested more than one level of schooling. The results are in Table 3, with percentages adding to more than 100%. The general question at the beginning, asking participants to “*indicate how well you think members of your business/organisation know the local schools/colleges,*” was answered by 78 participants: (1) Not at all, 1%; (2) Very little, 13%; (3) To some extent, 49%; and (4) A lot, 37%.

Table 2. Respondents' Highest Level of Education (N = 86)

Level	N	(%)
Year 10	10	(12%)
Year 12	7	(8%)
Trade/TAFE	31	(36%)
Degree or higher	34	(40%)
Other	4	(5%)

Table 3. School Level with which Most Closely Associated (N = 75)

School level	N	(%)
Primary school	30	(40%)
High school	47	(63%)
College	25	(33%)
District high	20	(27%)

The nature of contact and the extent of involvement community members had with the local schools was elicited by two items on the survey. The first survey item was quite general and listed five potential areas of contact with schools (Table 4) and some respondents selected more than one (hence percentages add to more than 100%). Seventy-two participants answered the first survey item on contact with the school, however only 39 (54%) responded to the second item, providing a brief description in a text box of the type and extent of the involvement.

Table 4. Nature of Reported Specific Contact with Local Government Schools (N = 72)

Nature of Contact	N	(%)
Provides work experience opportunities	48	(67%)
I (or members of my business/organisation) attend school/college functions open to the public	47	(65%)
Contributes goods or services to school/college enterprise and/or fundraising	38	(53%)
Provides (or supports) recreational opportunities	45	(63%)
Other	21	(29%)

Of the 39 participants who responded to the second item, three (8%) indicated they and/or their business or organisation had little or no involvement with the local schools and/or colleges, four (10%) provided work experience, seven (18%) were on school-based committees or councils, and eight (21%) indicated they provided scholarships or contributed to fundraising. Nine participants (23%) also commented that they or their organisation assisted schools to enhance existing programs by providing targeted support, goods, or services when requested or as required.

Many other types of involvement were also reported. Among those noted by local government members were distribution of eco-wraps and reusable aluminium water bottles; programs for health, teenage pregnancy, road safety, drug and alcohol use, gambling, community safety, and physical activity; the Kidsafe programⁱⁱ; the Seriously Smashed projectⁱⁱⁱ; the Glenorchy Youth Task Force^{iv}; arts and culture projects; organising a Youth Team; youth leadership programs; mentoring the Co-Pilots program^v; linking the Men's Shed^{vi} to the high school; sharing sport and recreation facilities; involvement in a Families and Schools Together (FAST) program^{vii} on family planning; organising guest speakers at the school; and attending end-of-year functions.

Representatives of not-for-profit organisations, community service groups, and service clubs indicated involvement including supporting breakfast clubs; providing opportunities for study and socialisation; developing a community garden on the school grounds; supporting students to attend national youth programs, including the Rotary Youth Leadership Award program^{viii}, the Model United Nations Assembly program^{ix}, and the Rotary Youth Program of Enrichment^x; providing mentors for Science and Engineering Challenges^{xi}; providing family support; and working with at-risk students. Two groups, one associated with tourism and one associated with the construction of wooden boats, indicated that, in one case, they took many schools on tours of a museum to learn of Tasmanian history, and, in the other, they worked with students identified by their school as having problems, helping them to build wooden boats and toys. One community service group member noted that the group was working with the school and other services to create a calendar of events in which the students could be involved. The group was also devising a referral system “so the teachers know who to contact and how.” Another participant commented that her organisation was working with students who were suspended from school, engaging these students in education during their period of suspension to help ensure “they are not next year’s criminals.” Another community service group member reported working closely with schools and the local council on a number of partnership programs, including the Food Connections Clarence project^{xii} and the Clarence Plains Youth Centre^{xiii}.

Combining data from the participants who responded to the survey item, as presented in Table 4, and/or provided additional information in the text box summarised in the preceding paragraphs, a total of 77 Community Partner organisations were reported by 70 participants (seven of the 72 participants noted in Table 4 reported involvement in two types of Community Partner organisations, and two indicated an “Other” type of contact without providing additional information and were therefore excluded from this analysis). Of the remaining 70 participants,

32 selected one or more options of specific involvement in Table 4 but without providing additional information.

The 77 Community Partner organisations were associated with 275 specific activities. The frequencies of activities were combined from the general engagement data in Table 4 and the text box responses. Table 5 hence tallies the general and specific projects or programs in the four Activity Foci (Sanders, 2001) for eight categories of Community Partners. These categories are the same as in Table 1, but ordered by the total N for each category.

Table 5. Type of Community Partner and Type of Activity in which Engaged (N = 77)

Community Partner	Activity Focus									
	Total		Student Centered		Family Centered		School Centered		Community Centered	
	(275)		(31%)		(1%)		(40%)		(27%)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Local/ national government (n=35)	137	50	40	29	2	1	52	38	43	31
Community-based organisation ^a (n=12)	48	17	15	31	2	4	19	40	12	25
Community service groups ^b (n=10)	34	12	11	32	0	0	16	47	7	21
Businesses ^c (n=14)	33	12	8	24	0	0	18	55	7	21
Health care organisations (n=1)	16	6	10	63	0	0	2	13	4	25
Education ^d (n=3)	4	1	1	25	0	0	3	75	0	0
Cultural & recreational institutions (n=2)	3	1	1	33	0	0	0	0	2	67

^a Includes not-for-profit organisations (n = 4), Community/Neighbourhood House organisations (n = 4), other non-specified community sector organisations (n = 3) and a Youth Worker (n = 1). ^b Includes unspecified community service groups (n = 7), Rotary Club members (n = 2), and a Lions Club member (n = 1). ^c Includes tourism (n = 4), manufacturing (n = 3), agriculture (n = 2), retail (n = 2), electrical contracting (n = 1), telecommunications (n = 1), and self-employment (n = 1). ^d Includes retired teachers (n = 2) and an individual in an unspecified educational position (n = 1).

The Activity Focus with the most Community Partners was School-Centered (N = 110; 40%), followed by Student-Centered (N = 86; 31%), Community-Centered (N = 75; 27%), and Family-Centered (N = 4; 1%). Examples of school-centered activities were instances of attending school functions and contributing goods and services. Student-centered activities included work experience and mentoring programs, youth leadership programs, and recreational opportunities. Community-centered activities involved community garden projects, community-based awareness programs relating to health and personal safety, and arts and culture projects. Family-centered activities focussed on parenting programs such as the FAST program mentioned earlier. “Local/national government” partners constituted the most numerous group in the study (45%) and engaged in the largest number of activities (50%). The organisations participated in activities roughly in proportion to their numbers in each partner category. Overall, the mean number of activities per Community Partner was 3.6.

The comparison of the involvement reported in the surveys with the involvement of the 11 community members interviewed in Tasmania (Watson et al., 2016a) and of the 443 community organisations in the United States reported by Sanders (2001) is shown in Table 6. The differences are considered in the Discussion. The data from Tasmania are consistent across Student-centered and Community-centered but somewhat different for Family-centered and School-centered.

Table 6. Comparison of Involvement across Studies

Location	N Activities	Student-Centered	Family-Centered	School-Centered	Community-Centered
Tasmania (Surveys)	275	31%	1%	40%	27%
Tasmania (Interviews)	108	33%	15%	27%	25%
United States (Surveys)	817	59%	17%	12%	10%

Discussion

In considering the Results, the comparisons invited in the second research question are included, where appropriate, in the discussion of the main findings of the first research question. A wide range of organisations chose to respond to the invitation to complete the survey at the project's invitation. This participation expanded the coverage from the Tasmanian interview data, although responses were not as detailed. The coverage included more types of community organisations, as well as businesses, a health care organisation, and cultural/recreational groups. The number and variety of organisations are encouraging for increasing the opportunities for involvement of students with different interests.

In the responses to the request to “*describe the extent/nature of involvement*”, many examples were provided of the Activity Foci with Students, Family, School, and Community. As seen in the Results, there was a wide range of involvement across the four activity types, including financial support and sponsorship, personal involvement, and various public health and environment programs benefiting students. This is not unexpected as one of the possible reasons the participants were likely to take part in the study was because of their involvement with their local school/s. One area of involvement mentioned by the participants was the provision of work experience. In Australia, having the opportunity to participate in work experience programs in secondary school has long been considered one way to increase school completion (e.g., Ainley et al., 1997; Fullarton, 1999; Rothman, 2004). Reporting on the findings of a student survey of secondary school students in a coeducational school in the Australian state of Queensland, Bradley (1992) noted provision of more opportunities for work experience as one of the changes most likely to increase students' willingness to stay at school. This opportunity was ranked fifth highest by the students overall and second highest by at-risk students. As seen in Table 4, provision of work experience was reported most frequently by the community members in the current study (67%) as the nature of the contact they have with the school. Work experience was also mentioned in community interviews for the larger research project (Watson et al., 2016a). In light of Bradley's work, and that of other Australian researchers, the community's focus on work experience is likely to be a positive step to increasing school completion for the students in these communities.

Many of the studies in this area have employed a wide definition of “*community*,” combining family and community involvement, often with family taking the prominent position in the interactions described (e.g., Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). The work of Sanders (2001) in focusing on two dimensions of community involvement only, has been the most useful for the research reported here and for the analysis of the community interview data reported by Watson et al. (2016a). Sanders provided the framework used in this study to document what the members of the community themselves reported on their involvement. In both the Sanders and the Sanders and Harvey (2002) studies, the data were collected from the schools and hence the current study and the community interviews in the larger research project (Watson et al., 2016a) are unique in reaching into the community itself for the information on its interventions.

Although the types of Community Partners in this study varied from the Sanders (2001) study, this reflects to some extent the cultural and community differences between the (regional and rural) state of Tasmania and the United States, where the Sanders study took place. On the one hand, local government, in Tasmania meaning “city councils,” appears much more prominent in this study (50% of activities) than in Sanders’ study where “Government and military agencies” provided only 8% of the activities. On the other hand, “Business and Corporations” (45%) featured in relatively more activities in the Sanders research than in Tasmania (12%). This may also to some extent be an artefact of the populations from which the samples were collected: schools in the United States and community members in Tasmania. Tasmania being classified as a regional and rural state with pockets of disadvantage (Norrie et al., 2014) suggests the Tasmanian community members’ perspectives of school are likely to be shaped by these characteristics. The types of organisations in the current study are more like those described by Gregoric (2013), with only faith-based groups not appearing in Tasmania, and health-based organisations not covered in South Australia. Although the Gregoric study took place in a capital city with a population more than twice that of the state of Tasmania, the characteristics of community organisations working with schools appear to be similar.

Based on the examples of the reported activities in the Sanders (2001) study, the community interviews in the larger research project (Watson et al., 2016a), and those in the current study, community involvement in schooling across the four foci appears to have the potential to help increase student completion of schooling and improve social capital as suggested in Figure 1. The figure visually conceptualises five core elements involved in the development of students’ social capital within a community and school engagement framework: (1) existing social capital; (2) student-centered activities; (3) family-centered activities; (4) school-centered activities; and (5) community-centered activities. Activities at each of the foci center on engagement with education, an essential element to improving student completion rates.

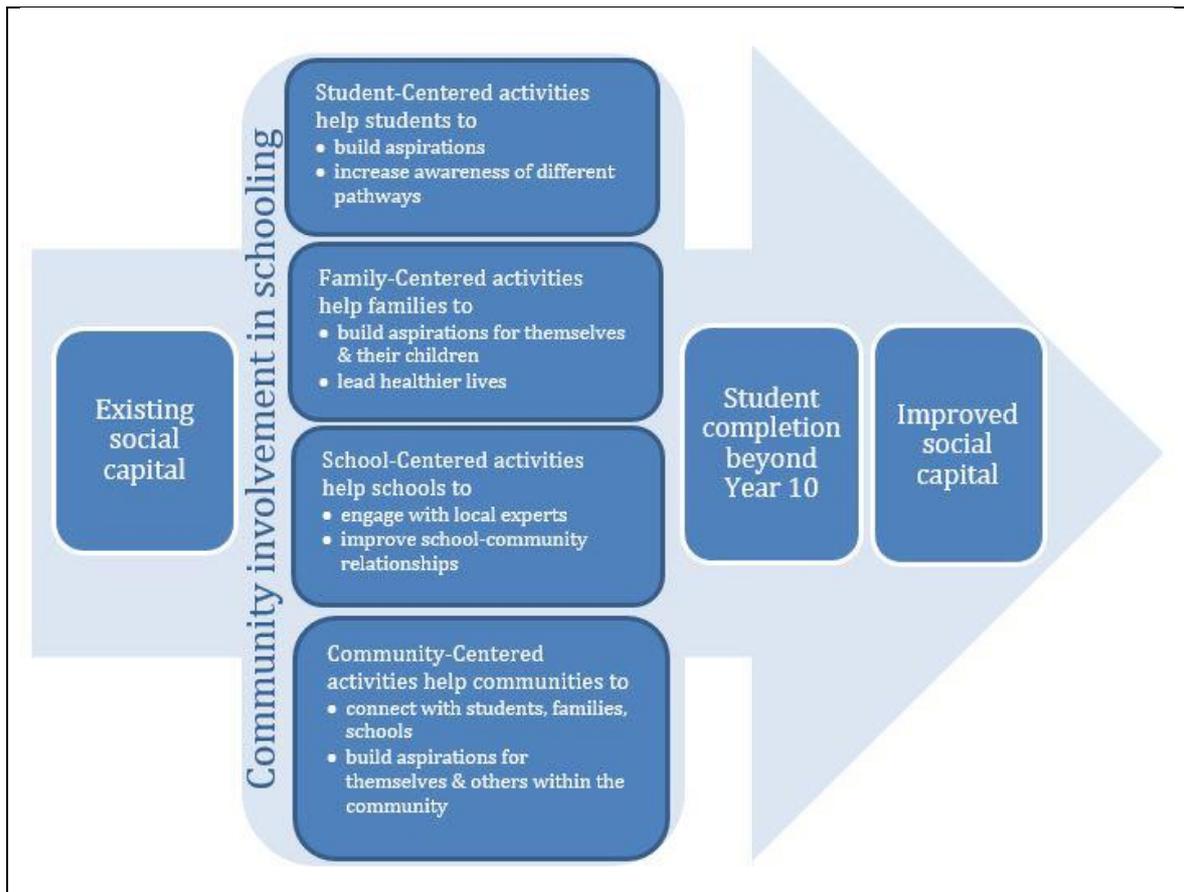


Figure 1. Hypothesised model of the influence of community involvement in schooling on student completion rates and students' social capital.

Implications

This study has implications in two directions, for action now and for future research. The strong indication of community support for student retention reported here needs to be acknowledged and encouraged by the Department of Education Tasmania and the State Government. Further, schools can be even more proactive than currently in initiating contacts and negotiations with the goal of developing partnerships to increase students' interest in school and hence their retention beyond Year 10. It is hypothesised that with improved completion rates, the social capital capacity of students should also be improved (Hands, 2008). Importantly, this hypothesised model (Figure 1) recognises that the development of students' social capital is influenced by community school engagement.

More research is required, particularly research that includes the beliefs and opinions of community members themselves. The survey outcomes on community beliefs serve as benchmarks for comparison (Watson et al., 2017), as does the degree of involvement with schools described by participants in the current report. The wealth of endnotes verifying the existence of programs offered is important not only for the validity of the research but also for reference in relation to future research to follow up on the involvement. Following the examples set by Sheldon and Epstein (2002, 2005) and Sheldon (2007), longitudinal data on retention beyond Year 10 directly associated with the involvement described in this report would be valuable in assessing its success and perhaps encouraging more organisations to get involved.

Limitations

The contested use of the term “community” (see e.g., Corbett, 2014; Fendler, 2006) and the definition adopted by the research team that the participants were a subset of the larger society in which the education of school children takes place, are discussed earlier and in other reports for the larger research study (Watson et al., 2015, 2016a, 2017). The participants in this research could not be a random sample of the population of community members in Tasmania because it was impossible to define the population precisely due to the method used to approach potential participants, and responses had to be voluntary for ethical reasons. The large number of ways in which the respondents who completed the survey were involved with schools in their communities suggests that they wanted to have their opinions and contributions known by the state-wide project. The question to participants was quite general and did not, for example, ask about how many students were involved or how long the involvement had lasted (most were still continuing). The way organisations were chosen and the self-selection nature of the participation influenced who was involved in this study. Despite the limitations of the sampling from a statistical point of view, because it was the first known survey of community members themselves, the outcomes can lay the foundation for future research.

Conclusion

This study has considered the direct interventions that were taken by a sample of rural and regional community representatives to motivate students to remain in school until the end of Year 12. The community members in this study participated in a wide range of programs taking place in schools and the community, and involving students and families. Although this study could not measure the direct impact of community involvement on completion rates of students, there are indications from international research that interventions can have an impact on improved attendance (Sheldon, 2007), behaviour (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), and achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005), as well as social capital (Hands, 2008; Warren, 2005). Further research may confirm similar outcomes in higher school completion rates in future years within Tasmania.

The examples of the community representatives’ involvement in schooling, reflected in the model in Figure 1, point to the potential for members of the community to have an influence on social capital for rural, regional, and disadvantaged school students. The responses of the community members in this study also reinforce Villani’s (1999) claim that educational reform “must be a community effort” (p. 105), and offer hope that regional and rural schools and those located in areas of disadvantage can combine the resources of their school system, their parents, and their community to achieve better long-term educational outcomes for their students.

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ⁱ For the purpose of this paper, “city” in Tasmania refers to the following four metropolitan areas: Hobart, Launceston, Burnie, and Devonport.

ⁱⁱ Kidsafe is an organisation committed to child safety (<http://www.kidsafetas.com.au/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Seriously Smashed is an education and awareness resource exploring the risks associated with binge-drinking and highlighting issues such as reckless behaviour, sexual intercourse under the influence, crime, bullying, and violence (<http://www.atdc.org.au/seriously-smashed-a-web-based-resource-for-youth-workers-2/>).

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- ^{iv} Members of the Glenorchy Youth Task Force (GYTF) are interested in issues affecting young people, such as drug and alcohol use, community safety, body image, and teenage pregnancy (http://www.gcc.tas.gov.au/content/Youth_Task_Force.GCC).
- ^v The Rural Co-Pilots program is a community mentoring program for young people to develop skills and confidence and to find new pathways to learning and work (<http://www.formerministers.dss.gov.au/2862/rural-co-pilots-guided-into-their-future/>).
- ^{vi} The Men's Shed Association is a community-based organisation to promote health and well-being for its members and to assist the community through the sharing of skills and knowledge (<http://www.tasmensshed.org/>).
- ^{vii} The Families and Schools Together (FAST) program is designed to improve parenting skills and connect families to their schools (<http://www.familiesandschools.org/>).
- ^{viii} The Rotary Youth Leadership Award (RYLA) provides young people with the opportunity to develop leadership skills (<http://www.rotary-sthlaunceston.org.au/index.php/programs/national>).
- ^{ix} The Model United Nations Assembly (MUNA) program helps develop debating and public speaking skills (<http://www.rotary-sthlaunceston.org.au/index.php/programs/national>).
- ^x The Rotary Youth Program of Enrichment (RYPEN) is an Australian initiative designed for youths aged 14 to 17 years, to improve their leadership and teamwork skills (see e.g., <http://www.rotary-sthlaunceston.org.au/index.php/programs/national>).
- ^{xi} The Science and Engineering Challenge is an outreach program to engage students in science, engineering, and technology (<http://www.utas.edu.au/science-engineering-technology/quick-links/resources-for-teachers/resources-for-teachers-content/tasmanian-challenge>).
- ^{xii} The Food Connections Clarence (FCC) Project aims to provide the community increased access to, and supply of, nutritious food (<http://www.ccc.tas.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/food-connections-infosheet.pdf>).
- ^{xiii} Clarence Plains Youth Centre provides recreational and learning opportunities, and functions as a drop in centre for information and advice (<http://www.ccc.tas.gov.au/page.aspx?u=1091>).