"School is not for me": Young people's perceptions of being a self-directed learner in a small rural Tasmanian town

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Article Info

Abstract

The Education Act (2016) was introduced in Tasmania to address the state's high rates of early school leaving. Such legislative reforms may overlook informal factors that influence educational outcomes. In this paper we argue that a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers of retention and engagement in diverse social and cultural contexts is vital in supporting the Education Act. Drawing on qualitative data, this paper provides insights into how a group of Grade 10 students in a small rural town in Tasmania made the choice to leave school early or continue on to some form of post-compulsory education. Using Berger and Luckmann's theory of sociology of everyday life together with Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of social and cultural capital, this paper highlights how perceptions of being a self-directed learner and feelings about the future shaped the young people's educational decisions. It emphasises how a localised form of social and cultural capital was associated with feelings of failure and anxiety about future learning, whereas a broader form of social and cultural capital was linked with more optimistic perceptions of being a self-directed learner. The paper suggests that the career aspirations, including university study, of young people living in regional areas may be supported through familiarisation with larger regional towns and raising their awareness of post school options.

Introduction

Whilst research on young rural people and their educational decision-making tend to emphasise the importance of some common factors, including physical distance, financial barriers and attachment to place, some researchers warn against treating people living in regional, rural and remote areas as a homogeneous group (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Fray et al., 2020). Fray et al.'s scoping review of aspirations for higher education of students from regional and remote areas highlights that "in making comparisons by location, often in reference to students from metropolitan areas, the definition of regional and remote communities in much of the existing research overlooks differences within and between such communities" (p. 71). Fray et al. call for more investigation into the uniqueness and nuances of particular rural communities and how this shape young people's educational decision making. In this paper we respond to calls to move beyond the metrocentric focus in youth and educational research, and seek to contribute to the emergent literature on how young people make their educational decisions in rural areas (Corbett, 2007; Corbett, 2013; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Farrugia, 2014; Fray et al., 2020; Wierenga, 2009, 2011).

In examining the nuances of the social and cultural dynamics in one rural community in Tasmania and how these dynamics influence a group of Grade 10 students' perceptions of themselves as future learners, we seek to make a contribution to strategies which may support the Tasmanian Education Act and young people's transition to further education and training. We particularly draw on data from the Education Department (2021) which is starting to indicate that patterns of retention and engagement have not shifted markedly since the introduction of the Tasmanian Education Act (2016). Legislative reforms may overlook informal factors that influence educational outcomes, and we use qualitative data from a PhD study completed in 2016 when the Education Act was first introduced to provide an in-depth understanding of some underlying drivers of retention and engagement in one small Tasmanian rural community.

This paper first reviews the current literature on the topic of young rural people and educational decision making. It then outlines the study's theoretical framework, methods and specific social context before moving on to a discussion of findings. The first findings section 'Life in s small rural town' establishes how interaction between geography and social life shape the young people's engagement with education. The second findings chapter 'Individualised aspirations' focuses on how responsibilisation shape the educational choices of young people living in a rural context and the third chapter 'School is not for me: Experiences of failure and anxiety about the future' uncovers a variety of reasons for leaving school early, including a self-perception of a lack of capacity for self-directed learning. The fourth findings chapter 'The role of social and cultural capital in perceptions of being a self-directed learner' explores how some of the young people thrived to be a successful and self-directed learner but equated this with a different kind of social and cultural capital which they perceived to be foreign to them. In contrast, young people who had a more optimistic perception of their future as learners had access to a broader form of social and cultural capital. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion that emphasises that although the young participants had internalised societal and educational messages that education was paramount to their futures, these messages also contributed to the perception of failure as a reflection of personal capabilities (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Mcleod, 2017).

The emphasis on education as a key driver of individual and societal prosperity has become so pervasive in contemporary society, that Cuervo and Wyn (2012, p. 41) have argued the role of education has become "a naturalised discourse." Yet "the achievements of regional, rural and remote students have, in the main, lagged behind urban students for decades" (Halsey, 2018 p. 11). In Tasmania, a regional state in Australia, the proportion of the population with school and post-school qualifications is particularly low (Regulatory Impact Statement for the Education Bill, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2022). To address the state's low retention and participation in education, the policy settings in Tasmania shifted markedly in 2016, with the introduction of a new Education Act. Year 10 students during 2019 were the first group of young people who need to meet this increased minimum leaving requirement. In Tasmania, after Year 10, a young person can choose from a number of education and training options, or a combination of different options if the provider/s allows. These include; Years 11 and 12 at any government or non-government school or college, or tertiary provider – this may include an Australian School-based Apprenticeship; a Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification through any registered training organisation; an apprenticeship or traineeship with an employer. In addition, young people with full-time employment, or other specific circumstances, can apply for an exemption to allow them to leave education and training (Education Act, 2016).

Current data (Department of Education, 2021) shows minor improvements in attendance, such as an apparent retention rate to Years 10-12 for Government schools of 79.5 per cent in 2020, up from 76.5 in 2019, but down from 80.4 in 2019. The 'apparent retention rate' is an Australian Bureau of Statistics measure based on the number of full-time students in Year 12 expressed as a percentage of the number of full-time Year 10 students two years earlier. The measure does not take into account a range of factors such as alternative education and training pathways, students changing to part time study and interstate, international or cross-sector movement of students. Although that the first cohort has aged into the change during 2019, the policy and public discourse in the lead up to that date, has emphasised a need to improve retention and completion rates in Tasmania (Department of Education, 2021). Legislative reform is a blunt policy instrument that may overlook informal factors that influence educational outcomes which require additional strategies to encourage meaningful and active engagement with education. In this paper we argue that a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers of retention and engagement in diverse social and cultural contexts is vital in supporting the Education Act. We use a sociology of everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) together with Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of social and cultural capital to capture how social life in a small rural Tasmanian town

shaped perceptions of being a self-directed learner in a group of Grade 10 students. Our analysis particularly highlights how a localised form of social and cultural capital was associated with feelings of failure and anxiety about being a self-directed learner, whereas a broader form of social and cultural capital was linked to more optimistic perceptions of engaging with further education.

Insights into the emplaced nature of young people's experiences often come from spatialised youth sociology (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Farrugia, 2014). There have also been calls to move beyond the metrocentric approaches of the sociology of education to investigate how place and biography life experiences interact to shape young people's educational choices (Corbett, 2007; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Wierenga, 2009; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). Financial costs associated with moving away to larger regional towns for education is often noted as a key barrier for young people living in rural areas (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009), and in their study of inequalities in university participation of young people from rural and regional and urban Australia, Chesters and Cuervo argue that 'with the financial costs that low [socio-economic status] SES regional and rural students have to contend with make relocating to metropolitan areas seem insurmountable resulting in high achieving students eschewing higher education' (2022, p. 58). In Australian and international literature on rural young people's educational choices Bourdieu's (1990) concept of social capital, a person's social networks, is frequently used to explain how young people's strong feelings of attachment to their local communities shape decisions to leave the education system rather than continue schooling away from home (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Fabianson, 2006; Wierenga, 2009, 2011). This relationship between attachment to local community and early school-leaving is highlighted in a 2016 ACER report which found 'high anxiety around transitions between Year 10 and Year 11 by some students, especially among those living outside of the larger cities' (p. 19) in Tasmania. A number of studies have found that greater interaction with the area beyond the young people's immediate environment enable them to relate more positively to choices to continue in post-compulsory education and training (Harwood et al., 2015; Halsey, 2018; Schmidt, 2017). According to this body of literature the educational decisions of young people living in rural areas are shaped not only by access to resources but also by particular interpretations of living in a rural area.

Young people's aspirations have been identified as a key factor shaping their educational decisions. One of the key aims of The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (2018) was to investigate "the key barriers and challenges that impact on the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote students, including aspirations and access issues" (Halsey, 2018 p. 1). One body of research highlights that the educational aspirations of young people living in regional areas are similar to those living in metropolitan areas (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Cuervo et al., 2019) but the context of social and economic restructuring means that these aspirations are not always realised. Some researchers draw on Bourdieu's (1990) notion of cultural capital, a person's knowledges, skills and tastes, to theorise young

people's aspirations and educational choices in rural areas. In Australia, Wierenga's (2009) longitudinal study of young people living in a small rural town in southern Tasmania highlights how broader worldviews are linked with decisions to continue in education, whereas local worldviews are linked with choices to leave school early. Corbett, in his study of young Canadian people, observes an 'uneven distribution of mobility opportunities' (2013, p. 275) in the local community and argues that the possession of 'mobility capital' is a key indicator of success in the post-industrial labour market. Cuervo & Wyn (2017) apply the concept of motilities, the potential to be mobile, to their analysis of data from the Life Patterns Study and interviews with rural young people and argue that "both mobility and motility generate different individual biographies, as well as different processes of social inclusion and exclusion" (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017, p. 8). Similarly, Cuervo, Chesters and Aberdeen (2019, p. 858) found that parental cultural capital played a key role in young rural people's educational decisions, but they also found that 'peer-derived social capital was independently and positively associated with having higher education aspirations'.

Young people in late modernity make the transition to adulthood in an environment of economic and industrial transformation in which the decline of traditional social structures is seen to have brought about unlimited choice and freedom. Consequently, ideas such as the "do it yourself biography" (Beck, 1992), "choice biography" (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) and "the project of the self" (Giddens, 1991) have become an essential part of the sociological vocabulary explaining human behaviour in post-industrial societies. The understanding that late modernity has provided young people with unprecedented choice (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), in combination with the prevalence of a neoliberal ideology promoting self-responsibility and self-accountability (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005) places the responsibility for educational success or failure with the individual. For example, Hodgson (2018, pp. 1-2) argues that an increase in the school leaving age in Western Australia has been associated with an increased level of disciplining the conduct of young people "towards normative ends of participation and engagement", pushing young people to "see themselves as engaged learners and self-reliant citizens". This emphasis on the "do it yourself biography" (Beck, 1992) and self-reliance mask the continuing importance of social structures such a place and has been described as a process of responsibilisation (Mcleod, 2017; Peters, 2001). This heightens the risk of both societal disapproval and self-blame for individuals who fail to make decisions that are deemed socially desirable (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Hodgson 2018). This understanding increases the risk that young people may internalise their failures through attributing "failed transitions" to lack of individual effort rather than as the result of the complex circumstances young people face in a late modern labour market (Nairn et al., 2012; te Riele, 2012; Woodman & Wyn, 2013). In Children of Rogernomics (2012) Nairn, Higgins and Sligo explore how the identities of young people in New Zealand have been shaped by the messages of neoliberal policies that people are self-interested and rational. The authors conclude that there was a tension between neoliberal expectations and the young people's own experiences. Whilst the young

people's recognition of the non-linear nature of school-work transitions was associated with uncertainty, they nevertheless maintained a belief in their responsibility to craft their own identities and lives because "within the meritocratic discourses of neoliberalism, however, structural constraints disappear, and individuals appear to act independently" (p. 174).

Theoretical framework

In the context of this study, Year 12 students in Australia would make a major decision in their lives: They can continue to get an education (and leaving home) or to work (and stay in their hometown). They will be making that decision based on how they have come to experience, perceive and understand their surroundings, the world and their future. Their sense of self and worth will also be objectivated through the education system as they are being assessed on their ability to pursue higher education, and also through their upbringing and socialisation in their family and town. Whatever they have internalised would be the knowledge, skills and aspirations they hold.

From a sociology of everyday life approach, small-scale processes are investigated and evaluated. There is a focus on personal experiences, with the social analysis of everyday activities. Society is conceptualised as a collective entity through everyday events, relations, and interactions. This entails that meanings and values, ascribed into people's understanding of everyday reality, emerge and perpetuated through social negotiation and everyday processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Ghisleni, 2017; Swingewood, 1991). In attempting to understand the emplaced nature of the young people's perceptions of themselves as learners and the connection with their educational choices, this analysis draws on a sociology of everyday life and the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1962).

This theory argues that that "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man [sic] is a social product" (Berger & Luckmann, 1962 p. 79). This social product is created in the everyday life, with its routines, activities and interactions. Everyday routines matter to society because they reduce the psychological costs of choices and simplify the complexity of social reality by generating predictable and habitual bodies of meanings and values (Ghisleni, 2017, p. 532). The shortcuts to apprehending reality involves a three-fold process of externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. Externalisation refers to the ongoing generation of the social order and reality through societal and interpersonal activities and relations. Objectivation is the process of getting the character of objectivity (p. 57). This sense of tangibility arises through human expressivity, and to individuals such human expressions have a felt presence and reality to them, and also to others who observe these expressions in society. Internalisation refers to the objectivated social reality that has been socialised into the consciousness of individuals and have become part of their worldview (pp. 119-159).

The young people's internalisation of their everyday world is conceptualised as social and cultural capital in this paper (Bourdieu (1977/1990). These concepts assist an analysis of how the young people's sense of place is shaped by their cultural knowledges and practices, and how these knowledges are mediated by their social networks. Through a set of sociology of everyday life lenses, it is revealed how such capitals are externalised, objectivised and internalised. Using this approach, the social dynamics of creating or removing barriers to educational attainment can be revealed. Although Bourdieu's concepts have been critiqued for inadequately dealing with structures other than class (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Schippers, 2007), this analysis draws on these concepts to capture how a sense of place shape young people's perceptions of themselves as self-learners in a small rural town in Tasmania.

Methods and social context

This paper is based on research undertaken in a mixed gender, non-streamed public high school in rural Tasmania at the end of 2007 to early 2008. The town and the school are located in what was given the fictitious name of Hillsville, a small rural town of around 3000 residents compared to the capital city Hobart with a population of 206,097 then. Hillsville High catered to a predominantly working-class families, with a sprinkling of students from more affluent backgrounds. An even number of male and female Grade 10 students aged between 15 and 16 years old participated in this study (n= 44). Ten weeks of participant observation was undertaken at the school, followed by interviews with students (n = 33), teachers (n = 9), parents (n = 8) and policy makers (n = 7) and these data were analysed thematically. This project received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania Network) and the Tasmanian Department of Education.

Participant observation was chosen as a key data collection technique because it offers a way to gain an insider's perspective of how young people make their educational choices. The need to unearth the layered meanings and understandings underlying young people's views on the country and the city seem particularly reliant on an insider account (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The emphasis on the multifaceted nature of everyday micro-interactions and meaning making processes of participant observation lends itself to an investigation of how young people's educational decisions are tied to their everyday experiences and social relationships (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Data was analysed using NVivo, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program (CAQDAS). It was anticipated that the participant observation would generate a large amount of field notes (Jorgensen 1989: 105). It seemed practicable to integrate these notes into one single program and then transcribe, code and analyse them without having to rely on numerous separate folders and files. Being able to manage all data within one program was furthermore considered the most secure way to store a large amount of notes, files and folders. 102 Using NVivo, a thematic analysis was conducted. First a code, or a node, was assigned to small meaningful segments of text by using NVivo's highlighting

and coding tool. Following the developments of these initial codes, categories were identified, categories subsumed into larger categories and core themes developed. Themes and sub-themes were finally amalgamated or subdivided and located within previous research and the theoretical paradigm (Grbich 1999, p. 234; Van Manen, 1997). Throughout the processes of initial coding, categorising and theme development the field notes and interview transcripts were re-read continuously in an open-ended dialogue of fitting and re-fitting data to pre-conceived concepts and emerging categories.

The relatively high rates of early school leaving in Tasmania is linked with the small proportion of Tasmania's population with school and post-school qualifications (Regulatory Impact Statement for the Education Bill, 2016). Tasmania is classified as a regional state and challenges to participation in education include the state's high levels of socio-economic disadvantage which is the highest of any state or territory and almost twice the levels of Australia overall, with many Tasmanian children missing out on quality early education experiences. This is linked to a range of educational, social and economic challenges for the state including the lowest Gross State Product per capita of any state or territory, lower productivity than Australia as a whole, with the gap widening over the past 20 years, lower wages than any other state or territory, lower labour force participation, lower life expectancy at birth for both males and females, poor health outcomes, lower functional literacy levels. These characteristics are often compounded by regionality, with many regional areas reporting lower labour force participation, poorer health outcomes, lower functional literacy levels etc. (Regulatory Impact Statement for the Education Bill, 2016).

The community in which the young people lived is an ethnically homogenous community with few residents identifying as having a background other than Anglo-Saxon. Measured by the SEIFA index, Hillsville is consistently listed as disadvantaged on a number of socio-economic and educational characteristics employed by this index (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] ABS, 2011). Although a high proportion of Hillsville's residents are welfare recipients, this coexists with a high concentration of wealth amongst a small group of people. Opportunities for manual labour are reflected in the relatively low unemployment rate, yet around ten per cent of young people aged 15-19 are unemployed. Organised leisure activities mainly consist of sport, and football is the dominant sporting activity. Hillsville High is an essential part of the community, which is located in an area of low education retention. Although there are some opportunities for post-compulsory education in the area, students wishing to undertake pre-tertiary studies are required to study in the nearest regional town. The high levels of social inequality, welfare dependence and fracturing of traditional pathways into relatively secure manual employment for young people paint a picture of a community in which the economic restructuring of the 1980s has had enduring effects.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study findings are not generalizable but the in-depth nature of the findings means that they are useful for generating new knowledge about how young people experience education in a rural context. Some data has been excluded from the study due to issues of anonymity and confidentiality even though it provides valuable insights into the motives and experience behind the participants' views on continuing their education. This has been necessary in order to protect the identity of respondents and where the material is of an especially sensitive nature.

The significance of self-reflexivity, 'the researcher's active consideration of his or her place in the research' (Bailey 2007, p. 119) is especially important in participatory research where the researcher is the research instrument through which the participants' stories are recorded and analysed. During the participant observation the researcher, like other fieldworkers, became deeply embedded in the research context (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 470). Therefore the researcher made a conscious effort to 'turn on herself (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 470) to make sure the research was rigorous and bias limited. Consciously recording and reflecting on the observations made during the participant observation formed an important part of the research process. A form of self-reflexivity also came to guide the recordings of daily events. Applying self-reflexivity to stories and conversations generated an acute awareness that all participants were active, knowing subjects who were conscious of their position in the social hierarchy at the school and the decisions they were making.

This discussion highlights the interplay between the residents of Hillsville and their geographic context. In many ways Hillsville is a community characterised by low income similar to other Australian communities, with low socio-economic status linked to particular health, housing and education indicators. However, the town's location in a particular part of rural Australia shapes its social, cultural and economic life in contradictory and unpredictable ways which differ from urban communities with similar characteristics.

Life in a small rural town

Similar to findings from studies of other rural places in Australia, the young people in this study expressed deep appreciation of their small community and their strong bonds with other community members (Leyshon, 2008; Wierenga, 2009; Butler & Muir, 2017). All the young people in this study described Hillsville as a relaxed little town free from the hustle and bustle of the city. This description of Hillsville included the perception of the town as inclusive and friendly. The young people consistently spoke of walking up the street and "knowing everyone" as one of the best things about their town. They appreciated that nearby there "is always someone to talk to", "always someone who cares". These descriptions of the importance of intimate and informal relationships in maintaining social coherence and inclusiveness highlights a community characterised by gemeinschaft qualities (Toennies, 1957) and high levels of social capital (Bourdieu, 1990).

The young people's connection to the natural habitat was also integral to their sense of self. Anna, Anita and Nina describe how embodied childhood experiences of "swimming in the

river" and "motorbike racing over the paddocks" characterise their love of the area. Nigel's descriptions of his rally track reveal similar, embodied connections with the land. Nigel explains that "I cut down the trees myself [for the rally track]. I drive around all the paddocks at home and then into the track." The young people's stories connect with other accounts of young people's embedded experiences in their local environment (Wierenga, 2009; Wierenga, 2011; Corbett, 2013; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017). In the case of Hillsville, life habitually lived is a life bound up with nature. The internalisation of the natural environment happens in subtle ways, such as the daily ride on the school bus through the green hills or through planned activities such as camping. The relationships with the natural world around them demand immediate attention to sensory experiences and brings a degree of slowness and authenticity to the young people's everyday life that is not easily found in the city.

The strong social capital in Hillsville and connection to the land on which the young people lived influenced decisions to leave the education system early, with both male and female participants nominating the move away from family and friends as a major deterrent to continue their education. Paul sums up the thoughts of many participants in his comment that "This is where I grew up, it's my home. I couldn't just start fresh somewhere else. I have all my family here so I would end up coming back anyway even if I went away". Often the young people's concerns about leaving their families were reflected in parental perceptions of their children moving away from home, with Mrs Beckett stating that "Stephen is just not mature enough to move away and live on his own, so we have helped him to find employment here". Even though the young people could make the choice to make a return trip from Hillsville to Springfield every day rather than moving to another town, this was often not considered an option because of the long bus trip involved. Wendy's statement that "I just don't want to leave, and it is too far to travel every day. I can't get up that early in the morning and be back so late. I'll stay here and see how I go" reflects the thoughts of many young people. The association between the move away from Hillsville and premature separation from family, friends and the local area, or hours spent travelling on the bus every day connects with other findings on young people and educational decision making (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). But the young people's accounts of their everyday lives also add depth to the understanding of how experiences of life in a small rural town are externalised through place-based interactions with people, nature and animals, and objectivated and internalised as part of a particular worldview (Berger & Luckmann, 1962).

The young people's stories start to indicate the importance of social and cultural capital in their lives and its role in shaping their educational decisions. One the one hand, the high levels of social capital and local forms of cultural capital supported and nurtured them in their daily lives through deep connections to local people, place and nature. On the other hand, this kind of social and cultural capital was also framed as a liability by the School and broader societal and policy messages on responsibilisation (Mcleod, 2017; Peters, 2001). The skills and knowledge some of the young people had internalised were unlikely to support the messages conveyed by the School that making responsible choices involved completing school and continuing to post-compulsory education because such choices were characterised by geographical mobility and flexibility. This interaction between geography and social life shaped the young people's interaction with their education beyond physical barriers and economic concerns in unique and unexpected ways.

Individualised aspirations

A common theme running through the young participants' aspirations was the highly individualised nature of their plans for the future. Some "just knew" that they wanted to be different from the mainstream and commented that "I want to make my own choices" (Wendy) and "I want to become an interesting person" (Anne) "I don't want a 9 to 5" (Robert). These comments suggest that these young rural people were similar to youth from other social and cultural backgrounds in engaging with the "do it yourself biography" (Beck, 1992) and being optimistic about their futures (McCleod & Yates, 2006; Nairns et al., 2006). The young participants strongly felt that education was key to realising their aspirations and obtaining a "good job", with comments such as "education gives me better chances of getting work" (Rose; John) and "you will have a more interesting life if you have some education" (Neville). Completion of Year 10, senior secondary education, vocational and tertiary were all seen as contributing to making good decisions, highlighting the 'naturalised discourse' of education in young people's lives (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p. 4).

Broader societal messages of responsibilisation (Hodgson, 2018) were promoted by the School and contributed to the young people's strong desire to make "good choices". In both formal and informal situations students were urged to "work hard and continue on to further education to be able to compete in the labour market" (Mr Fielding, final Year 10 assembly). These neo-liberal notions of self-responsibility intersected with a traditional farming ideology of self-reliance rooted in the community itself (Gray & Lawrence, 2001) and resulted in a unique place-based version of responsibilisation which strengthened the message that making good decisions were the responsibility of the young people themselves. Many of the young people often spoke about helping out in their families for example by "cutting wood and hunting" (Nigel) or "helping out in the family business" (Trudy, Rose), exemplifying the continuing importance of self-reliance. Anita's decision to be absent from school for an extended period of time because she was helping her family with an emergency on the farm received sympathetic replies such as "well done" (Ralph), "poor people" (Susan) and "I hope they are all right" (Mrs Willis). The school and its teachers praised the young people for their work ethic, with some teachers explaining with deep admiration that they had students in their classes who "get up at 3 or 4 in the morning to work before they come to school" (Mr Marshall) whilst also acknowledging how this interfered with the students' education because of their absence from school or "fall[ing] asleep at the end of the day" (Ms Carpenter).

The young people's value alignment with the concepts of self-responsibilisation, coupled with their expressed desire to "make my own good choices" is paradoxically nested within an evolving legislative framework that mandates a range of responsible choices. These choices align with assumptions from human capital theory aimed at advancing broader productivity goals (Tan, 2014). The intersection of aspects of traditional farming ideology and the neoliberal emphasis on responsibilisation meant that the young rural people in this study had internalised the pressure to perform "towards normative ends of participation and engagement" (Hodgson, 2018 p. 1-2) particularly deeply. They all had aspirations to obtain "a good job" and understood the importance of education in realising their ambitions. However, embracing these ideas was not straightforward, with many consciously making the choice to leave school early.

School is not for me: Experiences of failure and anxiety about the future

Despite a strong desire to embrace the formal curriculum, difficulties in engaging with academic work often resulted in feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness. An extract from the field work highlights a common response to engaging with the formal curriculum:

> One young man, Paul, has experienced extensive periods of time outside the education system in manual labour and has had experiences which he considers exploitative and dehumanising. He tells me he would like to 'turn things around' and give education 'a go' and that it is important to him to have a good resume he can show to future employers. He continues to on to write his resume, but it becomes evident that he experiences great difficulty in doing this. After trying for some time Paul yells out 'I don't need to do this' and soon he walks off, slamming the door behind him (field notes).

Paul's experience of attempting to engage with the academic curriculum was associated with a deep sense of frustration and feelings of failure. His response is similar to the responses of some of his peers who also experienced difficulties in engaging with academic study such as "I'm so dumb" (Phillip) or "you're wasting your time trying to explain that to me" (Gary). Through processes of objectivation and externalisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1962) these experiences and responses form the basis of some young people's internalisation of themselves as students who lack the capacity for self-directed learning, leading to choices to leave school early.

It is well known that class is closely linked to early school leaving (Bradley, 2008; Fullarton et al., 2003; Piscitello et al., 2022), but this study expands this insight through its observation that class also played an important part in shaping how the decision to leave school early was experienced. For some young people, the decision to leave school early was interpreted as failure. This was evidenced in common statements such as John's comment that "last year I had a fair old dip 'cause you think 'we've only got a year to

go, what are we gonna do...how will I manage after school'? Just now we've started to get to know the teachers, become their friends. When you first come here you look at all those high kids. But now when you actually are here it's a different feeling, we don't feel so big". Similarly, Ryan asserted that "I have to make the best of it now" and Ralph that "it's too late to change anything". The belief that "it's too late to change anything" indicates that the option to stay at school was inconceivable to these young people. This finding provides a contrast to the findings by Nairn, Higgins & Sligo (2006) that all their participants, even those who left school, maintained a belief in returning to education. Most of the young people in this study who made the choice to leave school early did not plan to return to education but felt a strong sense of "it's too late to change anything", highlighting the importance of understanding the uniqueness and nuances of rural communities and how this shape young people's educational decision making (Fray et al., 2020).

Being from wealthier backgrounds shaped the experience of the decision to leave school early differently from young people from working class backgrounds. This group of young people were typically moving into a family business, while a few members of this group had contacts through their family which allowed them to enter jobs that they saw as providing opportunities and security for the future. The choices made by young women like Rose and Trudy to "take time out" and "perhaps work in the business" was facilitated by their families' ability to absorb them into the family business. Stephen contended that "I love the place. I want to be here for the rest of my life. I've got a job so I'm leaving. Mum and dad knew some people and that's how I got the job. I did the interview, and it went well and I got the job. It's a bit of everything 'cause they like to call it multiskilled. Good pay and later on they might put me through TAFE, to get some certificates. A job you will rather leave school for than a factory job". The secure future contemplated by Stephen stemmed not from the opportunities afforded by Hillsville's labour market, but from their local social and economic capital which provided insurance against academic failure. These stories highlight the importance of parental social and cultural capital (Corbett, 2013; Wierenga, 2011; Cuervo et al., 2019) in young people's educational decision making, however, they also provide evidence that parents can have a role to play in the decision to not continue on to further education and training in a rural context where continuing education means leaving one's hometown and family.

The group of young people who had decided to leave school early to work in the family business or other local businesses was only small but sociologically interesting because of the way in which they illustrate how neoliberal and traditional messages about self-responsibility can converge in a message about the importance of individual achievement. It was common to hear young people from all backgrounds talk about the opportunities for work in Hillsville. Nick and Thomas, for example, made the comment that "out here [in the country] it is still possible to work your way up" and both John and Phillip emphasised that "[in the country] it is still possible to create your own opportunities". This perception was reinforced both inside and outside the school environment. On one occasion a young man asked his teachers why he should care about

education as he already had an asset of four million dollars and was going to continue working in the family business as soon as he was able to leave school (field notes). Despite the real opportunities for a few young people from middle class backgrounds to take up permanent and secure work in the family business, this was not an option for the majority of Hillsville's young people. Nevertheless, these stories confirmed dominant constructions of the countryside as resourceful and resilient (Burchardt, 2002; Little & Austin, 1996) and contributed to the legitimisation of the choice to leave school early.

For other young people who had been academically successful during their time at school, their relationship with community and the land they lived on shaped their decision to leave the education system. Anita's story reveals how her decision to not continue on to years 11 and 12 is strongly embedded in the local, natural world and her commitment to agriculture. From Anita's perspective, a decision to continue her education would result in opportunities for well-paid and secure work, but also in a loss of the activities she considers essential for her health and well-being, such as identification with wide open spaces and feelings of belonging to the family farm. Anita's statement that "I don't think I will like leaving here to go to college. What will happen if I don't like it? What if I make the wrong choice? I just don't want to make a choice" reflects a sense of anxiety about a future that expects her to become a particular kind of metropolitan learner away from the place, people and animals she loves. With her story of deep attachment to place, Anita's story adds qualitative insights into the "high anxiety around transitions between Year 10 and Year 11" found to be experienced by some students living outside the major cities (ACER 2016, p. 19).

The role of social and cultural capital in perceptions of being a self-directed learner

What characterised the group of young people who positioned themselves as unsuccessful learners was the local nature of their social and cultural capital. Statements such as "I have to make the best of it now" (Ryan); "it's too late to change anything" (Ralph) and "What will happen if I don't like it? What if I make the wrong choice?" (Anita) indicate that the option to stay at school was inconceivable to these young people. Experiences of a disconnect between the academic curriculum and the young people's own everyday experiences of a more physical nature formed part of the explanation of their perception of themselves as unsuccessful learners and this perception was linked to the local nature of their social and cultural capital. For example, Shaun questions another students' decision to leave Hillsville to go to university in his comment that "It's just not safe anywhere else these days" which reflects his close relationship to the area through his tight-knit family connections. Similarly, Paul who is "born and bred here, never been out of the state" thinks that "it's actually really boring here" but would never want to leave because "all my family is here, I would always end up coming back here". These comments pinpoint the importance of social capital in facilitating knowledge of the local community and other community members, and the fear associated with not knowing the area and people around you. For many of the young people, being a successful and self-directed learner was associated with a very different kind of social and cultural capital which perceived to be aligned with the demands of the academic curriculum, mobile and urban.

In contrast, young people who had a more optimistic perception of their future as learners and had made the decision to continue their education had access to a broader form of social and cultural capital. A broader outlook was developed where there were family practices of relating to the city and its people. Stanley explains that "I sometimes go to Springfield [nearest regional town], especially to see my aunty. I like the hustle and bustle of the city. I would rather live in a city. I like the noise. I love it. And I wouldn't get hay fever there...". The importance of social and cultural capital extending beyond the local community in producing familiarity and more positive feelings about the city is further encapsulated in Lauren's and Rose's stories. Lauren's account of often visiting her "family, Nan and Pop and my other Pop and some friends...there are always some of them I can stay with" and Rose's account of "mainly spending time with the family in the city...with all my family members there, my uncle, my Nan and a Pop and an aunty and another aunty and uncle in another city" show how experiences of rurality differed according to the nature of the young men's and young women's social and cultural capital. Emily's observation that "there's not much to do here" and her desire to "get out of here to see what the rest of the world looks like" also connects with her frequent visits to family members. Whilst Paul who is deeply attached to the area through his tight-knit social networks perceives the boredom of Hillsville as less risky compared to the unfamiliarity of the area beyond Hillsville, Emily sees the option of staying in Hillsville and enduring its boredom as being a riskier choice than not participating in the educational opportunities offered by the city because of her more extensive social and cultural capital.

The paradox of many of the young people choosing to leave school early despite their aspirations to obtain "a good job" through engagement with education can partly be explained by the discrepancies between their aspirations and the social and cultural resources they have available to realise those aspirations. The type of social and cultural capital the young people had internalised and valued is not readily apparent in the responsibilising ambitions of the new Education Act (2016). As this Act does not attenuate for place, the young participants' social and cultural capital was constructed as a liability which positioned them unable to make "responsible" choices for themselves (Mcleod, 2017), where the responsible choice is completing year 12 and continuing on to some form of post-compulsory education. These middle class and metropolitan messages contributed to the belief of some young people, only 16 years of age, that "it's too late to change anything" (Ralph) and their choice to leave school early with a sense of failure and anxieties about the future.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has examined how social, cultural and economic dynamics in one rural community in Tasmania influenced a group of Grade 10 students' perceptions of themselves as future, self-directed learners. In doing so this paper moves beyond both the metrocentric focus in youth and educational research (Corbett, 2007; Corbett, 2013; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Farrugia, 2014; Fray et al., 2020; Wierenga, 2009, 2011) and the notion of rural people as a homogenous category. As such it contributes significant insights into the diversity and uniqueness of small rural communities and how these dynamics shape educational decision making (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Fray et al., 2020).

A key finding of this paper is that although the young participants had internalised societal and educational messages that education was paramount to their futures, these messages also had unintended effects. They particularly contributed to the perception of failure as a reflection of personal capabilities rather than acknowledging the connection between educational failure and structural barriers (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Mcleod, 2017). Due to the internalisation of a sense of local identity some young people individualised the decision to leave school early and blamed themselves for being unsuccessful at school and for placing themselves in an insecure situation on the labour market. Feelings of failure and anxiety about the future highlight educational policies and their emphasis on self-responsibility and entrepreneurship deeply-felt fears of making the wrong choice reflected the young people's internalisation of the school's messages that a successful individual is one who continues on to further education as a pathway to a prestigious job (Hodgson, 2018).

At the age of 16, many participants in this study were choosing to leave school early despite their aspirations to obtain "a good job" through engagement with education, and they associated this choice with feelings of failure and anxieties about the future. These participants' local social and cultural capital played a key role in their perception of themselves as unsuccessful learners due to the lack of a broader form of social and cultural capital which was mobile and urban and seen to be more aligned with the demands of the academic curriculum. In contrast, young people making the decision to continue their education had access to a broader form of social and cultural capital which enabled them to make the choice to pursue further education and thereby position themselves as successful, self-directed learners. This finding emphasises the importance of facilitating meaningful and sustained interaction with individuals and educational institutions in larger regional centres in supporting young rural people's perceptions of themselves as successful learners.

Some findings of this paper are similar to findings by other work on educational choices in a neo-liberal context. For example, Nairn, Higgins & Sligo's 2006 study found that young people's recognition of the non-linear nature of school-work transitions was associated with uncertainty, but they nevertheless maintained a belief in their responsibility to craft their own identities and their participants, even those who left school, maintained a belief in returning to education. In this study, most of the participants did not plan to return to education but felt a strong sense of "it's too late to change anything" and "I have to make the best of it now". The difference may be attributed to the rural context of this study. The reinforcement of the idea of the self-responsible citizen through a different source of independent worker, the rural worker characterised by self-reliance and success through hard work, meant that the exposure of Hillsville's young people to the message of the self-responsible citizen was intensified. The combination of internalised messages of self-responsibility and the difficulties the young people experienced in fulfilling their high aspirations to themselves jeopardised their engagement with, and success in, education.

Areas of further research include further investigations of the embedded experiences of rural life, and how this influence educational decisions. Giddens (1991) assertion that place has become "phantasmagorical" does not fit the findings of research on educational aspirations and decision making in a rural context (Corbett, 2007; Morris, 2008; Schmidt, 2017; Wierenga, 2009). Place matters, and in the context of this study the young people's everyday experiences and the nature of their social and cultural capital worked to create or remove barriers to educational attainment.

The findings of this study suggest a challenge for the education system to address the way some young people's forms of social capital are constructed as a liability. The young people's own aspirations and desire to engage with further education is an encouraging finding. Initiatives to support aspirations may include programs designed to familiarise young people living in regional areas with larger towns and colleges. Regular contact with the nearest regional town and colleges may challenge the effects of responsibilisation by initiating a process of re-externalising, re-objectivising and re-internalising the capitals the young people know. As education systems and universities increasingly move towards student-centred, collaborative and community-based learning approaches (Shelley et al., 2019; Khan, 2019; Andersen & Feldstein, 2021), the new networks and knowledges obtained in these processes by both schools, students, and families might support young people and their families to embrace opportunities for further education. Making sure the young people are aware of their post school options and pathways back into education might also challenge the mindset of "I have to make the best of it" and encourage engagement with future education and training, including university study.

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