Aspire High: Impacting student aspirations in a regional community

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Abstract

This paper provides initial evidence of the effectiveness of an educational program in a Tasmanian regional community that has experienced ongoing industrial restructuring. In response to these changes, community and civic leaders adopted a multifaceted strategic plan to address employment needs and opportunities. Part of this plan involved targeting school children to help them explore a broader range of educational and career options. The program, *Aspire High,* involves Year 5 children visiting workplaces, the local Year 11 and 12 college, the local technical college, and a local university campus. This paper reports results from student interviews and surveys. While it is difficult to attribute changes in students' attitudes and aspirations solely to *Aspire High*, it is evident that they were enthusiastic about the program. Secondary findings showed that students become less positive towards school by Year 8, and that boys are less likely to be positive towards school and more likely to choose a traditionally gendered occupation.

Keywords: Aspirations, school, rural, partnerships

Introduction and Context

Tasmania is an island state off the south coast of Australia which is geographically isolated and relatively socio-economically disadvantaged to the rest of Australia. On average, Tasmanians have lower disposable income and higher unemployment rates. As a consequence, Tasmanian households receive the highest average household government benefits in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012). Comparatively speaking, Tasmania also has a low retention rate to the end of Year 12 (60%) (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). Whereas many students who do not finish Year 12 are involved in other forms of training, such as Vocational and Educational Training (VET), a higher proportion of young people are not in any form of education, employment, or training compared to other states. There is concern that these factors may lead to lost productivity, skill shortages, poor health outcomes, and demands on the justice and welfare systems (Cranston et al., 2014).

Traditionally, the study community has depended heavily on forestry and manufacturing; but over the last 15 years, this has changed dramatically owing to the closure of some prominent

industries. Currently, the community's largest employers are retail trade (13.4%), health care and social assistance (12.8%), manufacturing (12.2%) and education and training (8%) (ABS, 2016). Overall, the population of the community has a higher percentage of people with lower level certificates than at national and state-levels, and fewer people with higher degrees. In terms of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) score, Tasmania scores 1002.0 which is low compared with the Australian average, while the score for the study community is 920.6 (Profile.id, 2011). Socioeconomic disadvantage has been shown to have a greater impact on educational opportunity than any other factor (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). This profile is not uncommon for rural and regional communities in developed societies.

Partly in response to industrial restructuring, civic, government, business and educational leaders in the study community adopted a strategic plan to address changing employment needs and opportunities. Part of this strategy involved targeting school children to assist them to build a broader range of career aspirations through a project that we have given the pseudonym *Aspire High*. Our research generated data from industry partners, city councillors, teachers, parents and students. Here we present initial data about the impact of the program on young people's aspirations, which we define as a person's academic goals and plans, and/or ambition, to achieve something (Trebbels, cited in Korhonen, Tapola, Linnanmaki, & Aunio, 2015). We share findings from students' survey responses and interviews about their experiences in *Aspire High*, specifically to determine their attitudes towards school, aspirations for their futures, and the effect of *Aspire High* on each of these. The overall purpose of this research was to provide initial data to inform future decision-making for the program and to provide a baseline from which further research can be conducted.

Aspirations

Researchers have studied what influences children's life choices since the 1950s. Ginzberg (1952) found that young children act out adult roles in their play, and Gottfredson (1981) noted that as they get older, children start to rule out occupations they perceive to be beyond their ability. Although much career guidance is concentrated in secondary schools, research has demonstrated that children start to think about future careers at a very young age. Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou, Mylonas, Arygyropoulou, and Drosos (2013) found that primary school students felt informed about various occupations and expressed little uncertainty about future careers. By the age of 12, most children are able to make career choices and justify these choices (Seligman, 1994). Gore, Holmes, Smith, Southgate and Albright (2015) also found that as children became older, they became more uncertain about career choices identifying a wider range of influences on their choice of career (Howard, Flanagan, Castine, & Walsh, 2015). Gore, et al., (2015) also found that for Years 4, 6, 8, and 10 students, the most common reasons for choice of career related to: a) things they like doing; b) things they think they will do well and/or are interested in; c) things involving helping others; d) things that earn a lot of money. Research has also suggested a variety of factors that influence youth aspirations and career choice. These include family environment, teachers, peers, and role models (Howard, Flanagan, Castine, & Walsh, 2015) with parents and the family being identified as the most important (McMahon, Carroll, & Gillies, 2001; Anderson, & Cavallaro, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, *aspirations* referred to students' academic goals and plans and ambition (Trebbels, cited in Korhonen, Tapola, Linnanmaki & Aunio, 2015). The literature indicates that the process by which young people build these aspirations is complex (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale, 2015). Building aspirations is a process influenced not only by immediate surroundings but also by the social norms of social elites. Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale cite Bourdieu (1977) who referred to *doxic* and *habituated* aspirations to describe established conceptions of 'desirable futures'. Doxic aspirations are constructed and desired by those with

"more powerful inheritances of accumulated capitals" (p. 233). However, such aspirations may be effectively unachievable for low SES groups, who may perceive them as out-of-reach. Habituated aspirations are those influenced by people's awareness of their own situation, including economic constraints and immediate social norms, which result in imagined futures that appear believable (Mills & Gale, 2010). Research undertaken in the UK (Archer, Hollingworth & Halsall, 2007), for example, found that young people from low SES backgrounds held the perception that higher education is for 'people with money', who are 'posher' and 'cleverer' (p. 231) than them. Research of this kind calls into question the effectiveness of marketing and/or interventions that provide access to information alone. For interventions to empower young people with little cultural, social, and financial capital, it is important to engage children in meaningful learning while they are interested in their futures and confident about achieving their goals.

Aspire High: The program

The *Aspire High* program is an ongoing, school-based program aimed at helping students see that learning has purpose and brings opportunities. It seeks to improve student engagement and participation in post Year 10 education and training. Additionally, it aims to encourage students to aspire to a range of occupations. The program began in 2013 as a pilot with Year 5 students from three community primary schools. Three more schools joined the program in 2016 and yet more after our research concluded in 2017. Oversight of the program is maintained by an organising committee, consisting of community and civic leaders. It runs through the school year and includes site visits for Year 5 students to experience a day in their 'dream jobs' and/or at a tertiary institution. At the time of writing, *Aspire High* had the support of over 100 businesses from the local area. The program commenced in 2013 and, in 2016, approximately 70 Year 5 students took part.

Methodology

This paper reports on the findings from a cohort of Year 5 students who undertook the *Aspire High* program in 2016 and Year 8 students who participated three years previously, in 2013. Our research incorporated qualitative and quantitative methods, which included a survey and semi-structured interviews with Year 5 (pre and post *Aspire High* program) and with Year 8 students. Core questions were common to both Year 5 and 8 surveys and additional questions relating to the *Aspire High* experience were added for Year 8 students.

Instruments and procedures

1. Surveys
Surveys were conducted online, with students using iPads to enter responses. There were two sections: the first asked students about attitudes to school (including engagement, connection, academic self-concept, relationships with teachers), sport, friends, plans for future education, and what students felt about their teachers' and parents' aspirations for them. These items were derived from Watson et al. (2013). Some questions used the 5-point Likert scale while others required responses of 'yes', 'no', 'unsure'. The second section of the survey was developed from the work of McMahon, Carroll, and Gillies (2001), and students were invited to nominate an interesting job and indicate how they heard about that job.

The surveys were administered to Year 5 students in March, before the program, and in November, when the program was finished. The purpose of this pre-post format was to compare students' experiences as they progressed through 2016 to determine any short-range impact of the *Aspire High* program. In March, 78 students (38 males, 39 females and 1 unidentified)

completed the survey, while 72 students (34 males, 35 females and 3 unidentified) completed the post-survey in November. Students who indicated willingness to take part in an interview were randomly selected. Seventeen (17) Year 5 students (7 males and 10 females) were interviewed in November after completing their *Aspire High* experience. Unfortunately, the project team was unable to gain access to primary schools not participating in *Aspire High* in 2016, so we were not able to compare results with students who did not participate in *Aspire High* in 2016.

In May, surveys were administered to 123 Year 8 students from two community high schools (55 males and 68 females) who were the first cohort of students to participate in the program in 2013. Not all students participated in *Aspire High*, which provided an opportunity for comparison. Again, students were invited to nominate their willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview and were randomly selected to take part. Twelve (12) Year 8 students were interviewed (6 males and 6 females), five of whom took part in *Aspire High* previously.

2. Interviews
The interview questions were designed to initiate conversations (Hatch, 2002) and allow deeper exploration of issues and points of overall difference. The interviews invited students to elaborate on aspirations, career interests, qualifications/pathways, and for those Year 8 students who had completed *Aspire High* previously, the possible impact of *Aspire High* on their aspirations. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Data Analysis
The 5-point Likert items were coded as: 1-Very Important, 2-Important, 3- Neither important or unimportant, 4-Not really important, 5-Totally unimportant, or: 1-Always, 2-Most of the time, 3-Sometimes, 4-Not often, 5-Never. For each of these 5-point Likert items, 2-sample independent *t*-tests were carried out to compare mean scores. When carrying out multiple *t*-tests on the same samples, the probability of falsely claiming significant differences (Type I error) increases above that of the chosen significance level. Therefore, the Bonferroni correction was used to control the resulting Family Wise Error Rate. With this method, the level of significance is adjusted for the number of tests carried out. For each 5-point Likert item, the mean response scores were compared between: males and females in Year 5, males and females in Year 8 and all of the Year 5 and Year 8 students. In addition, the items were placed into categories depending on the nature of the questions. These categories were: *Parental Aspirations*, *Engagement with Schooling*, *Relationship with Teachers*, *Connection with Schooling*, and *Academic Self-Concept*. The results section provides details about which items appeared in each category. The mean response score of each category was calculated and placed on a number line so that the relative agreement between each score could be compared (Watson et al., 2013). Student responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed by the first author, drawing on grounded theory principles (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Results

The results have been reported around five themes: *attitudes to school, influences of family and friends, career choices, gender differences,* and the *experience of Aspire High.* Unless otherwise stated, all values are expressed as percentages of students who answered either Very Important or Important, or Always or Most of the Time.

1. *Attitudes toward school*

Tables 1 to 3 indicate that in both Year groups, the areas of overall education, having good friends and educational outcomes, were identified as more important than "playing sport", which was considered the least important of the options. In addition, the majority of students thought they worked hard at school, understood their schoolwork and were "good at school." Table 2 demonstrates a decline in students' perception of their academic performance from Year 5 to Year 8. At the same time, perceptions of students' English performance remain constant. These data indicate that there is a 14+ percentage point reduction in students who felt that they were good at schoolwork and at Mathematics from Year 5 to Year 8.

Both Year 5 and Year 8 students interviewed expressed liking school. Only two of the 17 Year 5 students interviewed contradicted this view. One student stated that he "*didn't like school much but like[s] learning interesting things*", whereas the other commented, "*no one likes school.*" In both year groups, a number of students highlighted lunchtime as their favourite time at school. All students had favourite subjects and this was their preferred time on the timetable. Although favourite subjects varied amongst the cohorts, English and Mathematics appeared both in the least and most liked categories.

When surveyed about perceptions of friends' attitudes to school, in both Year 5 and Year 8 approximately 60% of the students stated that their friends liked school. Approximately 80% stated that friends wanted to do well (Table 4). This finding indicates how most students we surveyed see themselves as engaged and successful students, although some ambivalence emerged about students' perceptions of how their peer communities engage with school.

Table 1: *Engagement with Schooling*

Question	Year 5	Year 8
My education	92.3	97.6
Getting good grades	91.1	93.5
Learning interesting things	88.5	72.5
Having good friends	93.6	92.9
Playing sport	79.5	65.1

Table 2: *Academic Self-Concept*

Question	Year 5	Year 8
I am good at schoolwork	84.6	70.6
I am good at Mathematics	78.2	64.3
I am good at English	71.8	72.2

Table 3: Connection with *Schoolwork*

Question	Year 5	Year 8
I work hard at school	75.9	85.7
I understand my schoolwork	71.8	75.4
I get good grades	74.4	64.3

Table 4: *Peer influence*

Question	Year 5	Year 8
My friends like school	57.7	59.5
My friends want me to do well at school	66.2	74.6
My friends want to do well at school	83.1	77.7

Students were also asked about the support they felt they received from their teachers. The students overwhelmingly indicated that their teachers wanted them to do well (Table 5). However, the proportion of students who reported that their teachers were interested in them was considerably smaller. This finding seems to illustrate ambivalence in terms of how students see key actors offering support and encouragement.

Table 5: *Relationship with Teachers*

Question	Year 5	Year 8
My teachers want me to do well	93.6	95.3
My teachers are interested in me	68.0	59.5
My teaches listen to me	80.8	74.6
My teachers help me learn	87.2	90.5
My teachers support me	83.3	79.4
My teachers treat me with respect	92.3	88.1
My teachers think I can do well at school	83.3	89.6

Whereas approximately 60% of the Year 8 students believed their teachers wanted them to continue after Year 10, less than 40% believed teachers wanted them to finish Grade 12 (Table 6). These results, and those relating to apprenticeships, need to be interpreted with caution because many students indicated they were not sure what apprenticeships are. Others were confused about what careers required apprenticeships. Overall, Year 5 students showed more positive attitudes to school and to their teachers. Still, it is not clear what messages students receive from teachers about expectations for further study and careers. It should, we think, be concerning that such a small percentage of students (52.6% of Year 5s and 35.7% of Year 8s) perceive that their teachers want them to complete Year 12.

Table 6: *Proportions of students (in percent) who said 'yes' or 'unsure' in the category of Teacher Aspirations*

Question	Year 5		Year 8	
	Yes	Unsure	Yes	Unsure
My teacher wants me to get a good job when I finish school	64.1	33.3	65.9	32.5
My teacher wants me to stay at school after Year 10	50.0	47.4	59.5	37.5
My teacher wants me to finish Year 12	52.6	46.2	35.7	61.1
My teacher wants me to go to University	46.2	51.3	35.7	61.1
My teacher wants me to get an apprenticeship	35.9	60.3	18.3	77.8

The mean value for 5-point Likert questions in Tables 1 to 5 were determined and then compared using a 2-sample *t*-test for the difference in means. Despite the observed difference in means between several of the variables in favour of Year 5, none of the differences in means were statistically significant once the Bonferroni correction was applied. Following the procedures in Watson et al. (2013), the questions were then divided into categories and the mean scores for the following categories: Engagement with Schooling (Table 1), Academic Self-Concept (Table 2), Connection with Schoolwork (Table 3), Friends (Table 4), Relationship with Teachers (Table 5)

and Parental Aspirations (a) (Table 7, next section), were calculated and placed on a number line for comparison and this is illustrated in Figure 1.
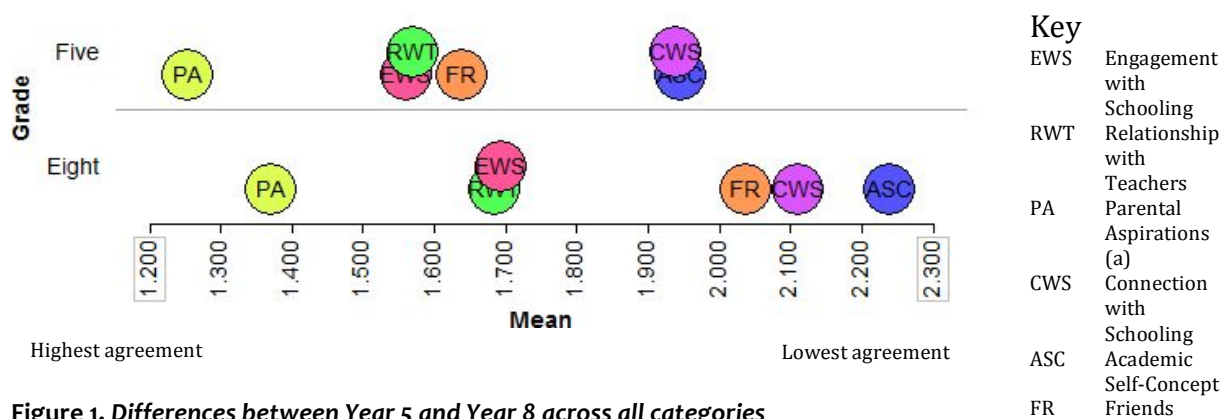

*Figure 1. **Differences between Year 5 and Year 8 across all categories***

2. Influences of family and friends

In the survey, 95% of the students stated that their parents wanted them to do well at school and asked them about their day at school (Table 7). In contrast, only approximately 70% of the students stated that their parents wanted them to stay at school until Year 12 (Table 8). The proportion of students who stated that their parents wanted them to go to university reduced from 60.3% in Year 5, to 43.1% in Year 8.

In the interviews, most of the students saw their families supporting their educational and career aspirations. The majority of Year 5 and Year 8 students indicated they talked about their future with parents and/or family and friends. When asked whom they admired, approximately half of the Year 5 students said they admired teachers, mothers, other family members, older friends, or other significant adults with whom they felt a connection (e.g., coaches/sporting people, community group leaders). Amongst Year 8 students, 11 indicated that they did not talk about careers with their teachers. One student, however, mentioned that a Physical Education (PE) teacher's example inspired her to aim for this career.

All the Year 8 students interviewed indicated their parents wanted them to choose a career for themselves. The majority of the students also expressed admiration for their parents' guidance, ability to run a business, and for their job skills. The students interviewed demonstrated how their sense of achievable careers is framed within the ambit of what they see in their day-to-day lives, either in their homes, families and communities, or through the media.

Table 7: *Proportions of students (in percent) who answered 'always' or 'most of the time' in the category Parental Aspirations (a).*

Question	Year 5	Year 8
My parents want me to do well at school	96.2	97.6
My parents ask me about my day at school	91.0	85.7

Table 8: *Proportions of students (in percent) who said 'yes' or 'unsure' in the category of Parental Aspirations (b).*

Question	Year 5	Year 8

	Yes	Unsure	Yes	Unsure
My parents want me to stay at school after Year 10	71.8	24.4	72.2	22.2
My parents want me to finish Year 12	69.2	28.2	73.8	22.4
My parents want me to go to university	60.3	38.5	43.1	52.8
My parents want me to get an apprenticeship	38.5	53.8	23.8	65.1
My parents want me to choose my own career	91.0	7.8	91.3	8.7

In terms of the physical environment, these results show that there was an improvement of access to those resources from Year 5 to 8, with important resources such as books and a desk being the least available to them (Table 9).

Table 9: *Proportions of students (in percent) who have the stated items at home in the category of Physical Environment.*

At home I have…	Year 5	Year 8
A desk at which to work	56.4	62.7
A room of my own	76.9	86.5
A computer I can use	66.7	87.3
Access to the internet	80.8	92.9
Books to help me with my schoolwork	67.9	69.0

3. Career choices

Whereas the majority of students in the survey indicated that they knew what they wanted to do as a career in the future, students' levels of certainty about educational plans decreased as they progressed from Year 5 to Year 8 (Table 10). In contrast, the students maintained uncertainty about the educational plans of their peers in both Year 5 and Year 8 (Table 11).

Table 10: *Proportions of students (in percent) who said 'yes' or 'unsure' in the category of Career Aspirations.*

Question	Year 5		Year 8	
	Yes	Unsure	Yes	Unsure
I plan to finish Year 12	79.5	15.4	76.2	17.5
I plan to go to university	67.9	23.1	52.4	36.5
I plan to get an apprenticeship	60.3	28.2	36.8	39.2
I know what sort of job I would like to do when I finish school	84.6	7.7	61.5	23.8

Table 11: _Proportions of students (in percent) who said 'yes' or 'unsure' in the category of Friends' aspirations._

Question	Year 5		Year 8	
	Yes	Unsure	Yes	Unsure
My friends want to stay at school after Year 10	41.0	53.8	46.0	50.8
My friends want to finish Year 12	34.6	56.4	45.6	52.0
My friends want to keep learning after Year 12	29.5	61.5	26.2	70.6

Year 5 students surveyed were asked to nominate a job they would like to do when they leave school and explain how they had heard about that job. In Year 5, the highest proportion (15.6%) of chosen careers related to professional sports or similar. 35.6% of the students knew about their chosen career because it was the occupation of a family member, or because they heard about it from family members or family friends. A further 18.4% of the students chose their occupation from a hobby or activity in which they already took part (Tables 12 and 13).

Table 12: _Choice of occupation in Year 5_

Category	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Arts	0	5	5	6.5
Sport professional or related	9	3	12	15.6
Medical professions	0	6	6	7.8
Science	2	2	4	5.2
Computers	7	0	7	9.1
Trades	7	1	8	10.4
Armed forces and police	5	1	6	7.8
Hairdressing/beautician	0	7	7	9.1
Miscellaneous	2	7	9	11.7
Other professions	5	4	9	11.7
Don't know	2	2	4	5.2
Total	39	38	77	100

Table 13: _How the students in Year 5 heard about their chosen occupation_

How they heard about these jobs	Percentage
Family does it	14.5
Heard about it from family or family friend*	21.1
Hobby or activity of mine	18.4
Seen it/visited where it is done	7.9
Internet/research	11.8
TV/movies/YouTube	3.9
School	7.9
No answer	7.7

After the Year 5 students undertook _Aspire High_ visits, they were asked if they had changed their minds about future jobs they would like to do. Twenty-one out of the 71 students who completed the survey the second time said that they had changed their minds, and 46 students said that they would still like to do what they had chosen before. The other students did not answer this question. Overall, students' comments were positive. Some claimed _Aspire High_ visits had inspired them: "_I want to do [the job] more than before_"; or that the visits opened their eyes to other possibilities: "_[I now know that] I don't have to be a PE teacher; there are so many more teaching opportunities_"; or led them to change their mind: "_[The visit] showed me that I might not_

like it.” The comment made by one student summarises the potential impact of the program on students' self-efficacy: *“It has changed me in all different ways. It has made me look to being older and also it has made me believe in myself a bit too.”* We think it is significant that the program has changed minds and caused students to question their own assumptions and imagined trajectories.

In Year 8, the highest proportion (19.8%) chose 'other professions' which incorporates a wide variety of choices (Table 14). The largest differences, expressed here in percentage points, were for sports professional or related occupations (decrease of 10.6%), other professions (increase of 8.1%), medical professions (increase of 5.4%), and computer and computer-related occupations (increase of 5%). It was apparent that 38.5% of the students knew about their chosen career because it was the occupation of a family member, or because they heard about it from a family member or from family friends. Here we see students becoming more circumspect, or perhaps even 'realistic', about career choice by what they observe in family life (Table 15). A further 17.2% of the students chose their occupation from a hobby or activity they already took part in. Increased life experience was reflected in the new category 'interest of mine'. This category reflects how students have become interested in an area not associated with immediate experiences. For example, one student chose marine biologist commenting that she *“just got interested in saving our oceans”* and *“I found out what a zoologist does after doing some research.”* For choices relating to the medical professions, there were answers relating to personal experiences. For example, one student identified nursing as a potential career, *“when I visited the hospital.”*

Table 14: *Choice of occupation in Year 8*

Year 8	Male	Female	Total	Percentage	Difference from Year 5 (percentage points)
Arts	4	2	6	5.0	- 1.5
Sport professional or related	5	1	6	5.0	- 10.6
Medical professions	2	14	16	13.2	+ 5.4
Science	3	5	8	6.6	+ 1.4
Computers	4	1	5	4.1	+ 5.0
Trades	13	3	16	13.2	+ 2.8
Armed forces or police	5	4	9	7.4	- 0.4
Hairdressing/beautician	0	8	8	6.6	- 2.5
Miscellaneous	5	14	19	15.7	+ 4.0
Other professions	7	17	24	19.8	+ 8.1
Don't know	3	1	4	3.3	- 1.9
Total	51	70	121	100	

Table 15: *How the students in Year 8 heard about their chosen occupation*

How they heard about these jobs	Percentage
Family does it	13.9
Heard about it from family or family friend*	24.6
Hobby of mine	17.2
Interest of mine	7.4
Seen it/visited where it is done	10.7
Internet/research	4.9
TV/movies/YouTube	4.9
School	6.6
Don't know how I heard about it	5.7
Aspire High Program	0.8
No answer	3.3

*Some of these could be in the category "family does it" but it was difficult to tell from their responses.

All 17 Year 5 students interviewed indicated that they intended to finish Year 12, and five wanted to continue to university and/or TAFE studies. This may point to the success of *Aspire High* and other initiatives aimed at making Year 12 completion a normative expectation. Eleven out of the 12 Year 8 students planned to finish Year 12, six of those planned to study at university, while three planned VET training.

Students from both Year 5 and Year 8 demonstrated an understanding of pathways needed to achieve their preferred educational outcomes and occupations. The difference between Year 5 and Year 8 students resided in their level of confidence when talking about pathways. Although five of the 17 Year 5 students were able to talk about some sort of education pathway to a preferred career, most were incorrect or uncertain. They had a more confidence, however, about what they *"would have to be good at."* A student who wanted to work with small children, for example, knew she would have to be "*patient, careful, respectful and gentle*" and also felt she would have to be "*creative – in art, music, and a little bit of everything else."* The complex relationship between pursuing higher education and leaving rural and regional communities is also indicated in the Year 8 interviews. Three of the 12 students stated that they would have to leave the community for their planned careers, six planned to live in the community, with some realising they would need to go away to university for a time.

4. *Gender differences*

The 5-point Likert scale items were separated by gender. Following the procedure in Watson et al. (2013), the questions were divided into categories and the mean values for each category were placed on a number line. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate that in both Year 5 and Year 8 the girls had more positive attitudes to school. The mean values for each of the individual 5-point Likert scale question were also compared between genders using 2-sample *t*-tests. Although several of the mean values favoured girls, none of these differences were significant once the Bonferroni correction was applied.
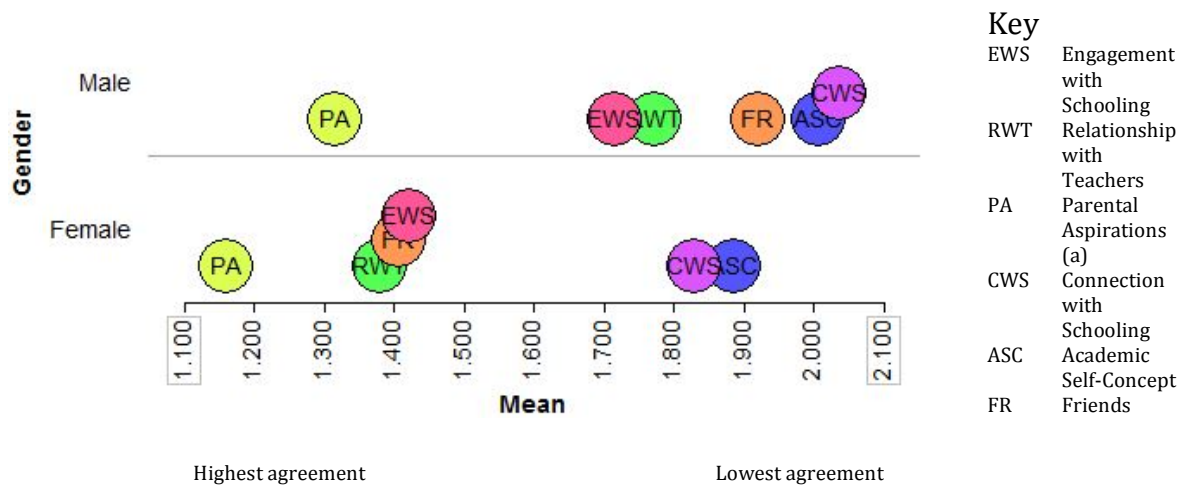
Figure 2. *Differences between boys and girls in Year 5 across all categories*
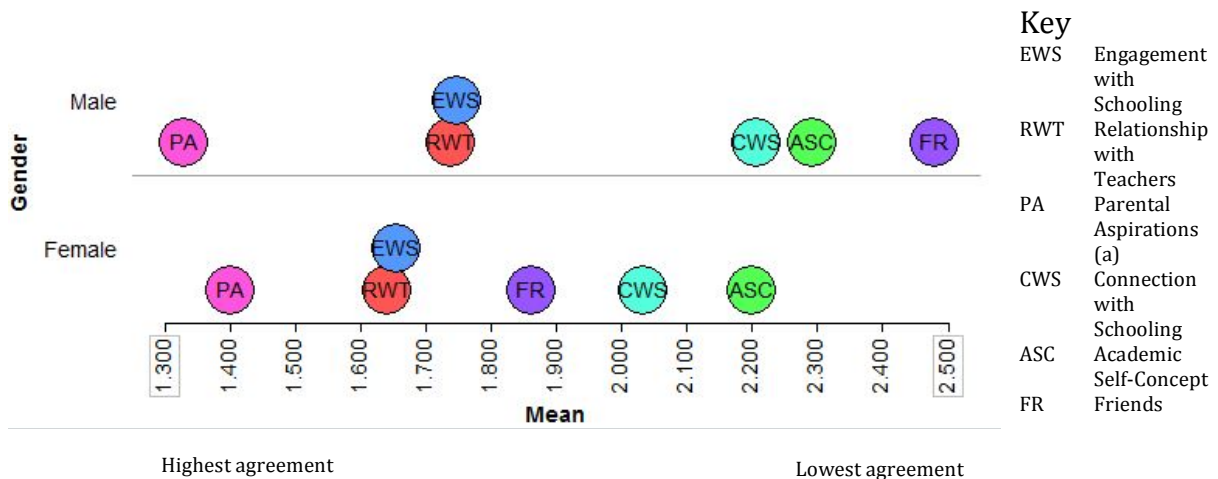

Figure 3. *Differences between boys and girls in Year 8 across all categories*

Marked differences in gender were identified in the survey data relating to career choice (Tables 12 and 13). Overall, in both Years 5 and 8, females were more likely to select historically male careers. They also chose a wider variety of careers than the males. In Year 5, the most popular choices for the males were sports players (23%), trades (18%), police or defence force (13%) and computers (13%). In contrast, 24% of the female choices were professional (lawyer, doctor, veterinarian and physicist). Eighteen percent of females chose hairdresser or beautician, and 7% chose dancer or dance teacher. This pattern changed between Year 5 and Year 8. In Year 8, only three males (6% of choices) wanted to be professional sports players and only 5 (10%) wanted to join the police or defence forces. The most popular choices for males in Year 8 were trades (25%) (builder, plumber, mechanic, diesel mechanic and electrician) followed by a profession (17%) (lawyer, architect, doctor and marine biologist). By Year 8, 33% of females chose a profession (teacher, veterinarian, marine biologist, forensic scientist, doctor, lawyer, psychologist and physiotherapist). Eleven percent of the choices involved hairdressing and 10% chose nursing.

5. The experience of Aspire High

Survey data that examined students' attitudes to schooling did not show differences that could be attributed to their *Aspire High* experiences. Overall, however, Year 5 students interviewed after their *Aspire High* experience reported favourably on the visits, regardless of whether or not

they still saw the career favourably after the visit. When asked about visits to educational institutions, 14 were very positive, and most described them in detail. Students enjoyed human contact and the opportunity to see options for their future. All reported they would recommend *Aspire High* to younger siblings. Similarly, all of the Year 8 students remained very positive about their experience three years later and indicated they too would recommend it to younger siblings. It is acknowledged, however, that it is likely that the students who volunteered for interviews may represent the more articulate and more highly motivated members of the entire student cohort.

Discussion

Aspire High aims to help young people, particularly those from families not engaged in extended educational trajectories, to become aware of employment opportunities and opportunities for further study within their community. In this regard, its designers recognised the economic and social diversity in the community, and how educational choices and career path visibility are conditioned by a student's family social position and interpreted through different value sets.

Given that the data reported here is a point-in-time evaluation (2016), it is not possible to state definitively that the *Aspire High* program has had significant impact on the attitudes and career plans of the Year 8 students. We are able to say something, however, about the impact of the program on the Year 5 students who completed the same survey before and after participating in *Aspire High (2016)*. Participating in the program either affirmed career aspirations or identified other possible futures. All students from both Year 5 and 8 cohorts were left with a sense of enthusiasm about *Aspire High*. They recommend it to others.

This research also demonstrates how key contributors to students' thinking about education and careers are parents, close family members, other significant adults, and friends. We conclude though, that family support can take different forms and may not include the transmission to the student that Year 12 completion is essential. This mirrors findings from Watson et al. (2017a, 2017b) and Corbett (2017) in this issue. Overwhelmingly, the students in both cohorts believed their parents wanted them to choose their own career. When it came to choice of occupation, a similar proportion of students in both cohorts stated that their choice was based on family experience and guidance. A similar proportion of both cohorts also chose their occupations based on an activity they already liked doing, consistent with the findings of Archer, DeWitt and Wong (2014) who found that family members and hobbies were influential in students' choices.

Of particular note here were the gendered patterns of the choices students made about future careers. In Year 5, the most popular choice for boys were sports or the trades whereas girls of this age named a profession first, followed by traditional gendered trades (beautician, hairdresser). By Year 8, the influence of male socialisation is apparent and gendered trades were the most popular career choice for boys followed by professions. These trends were also reported by Phipps (1995), who found that girls were more likely to name a career that required a tertiary education than boys. It was also identified that girls from both cohorts had more positive attitudes towards school and their teachers generally. This finding supports Sullivan, Riccio and Reynolds (2008), who found that girls are more positive towards school and believe their teachers care about them (Valeski & Stipek, 2001). These differences have been reported to begin from an early age, with boys in kindergarten demonstrating attention challenges (Zill & West, 2001) and classroom disruption (Downey & Vogt Tuan, 2005), while girls typically show more self-control (Ready, LoGerfo, & Burkham, 2005). This is of concern as classroom behaviour has been related to poor academic achievement (Pahlke, Cooper, & Fabes, 2013).

Students' evolving career choices probably reflect a wider experience of the world. For instance, students in Year 8 were less likely to choose athletic careers. Similarly, awareness of a range of professions requiring scientific training seemed to increase. Students in Year 8 identified careers related to their 'own interests' and/or experiences, internet research and/or television. This diversification of interest was mirrored by a more finessed understanding of educational and dispositional requirements for particular professions. It is important, therefore, that students' career guidance does not force premature choices that might influence premature closure of future options (Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2013).

As students become increasingly curious and knowledgeable about possible careers, their capacity to undertake the level of study that is required also becomes more evident to them. Although we found increased awareness of the need for hard work and understanding in Year 8 compared with Year 5, fewer students indicated that they achieve good grades. Consistent with Gore et al. (2015), we found that students became less clear about their career and educational paths as they progress through school. This may be a result of wider experience, or an indication that they become more realistic and less idealistic as they move from Years 5 to 8. It could also indicate, though, that early aspirations are later seen as unachievable as youth become more aware of their family's position in society (Zipin et al., 2015). Indeed, one of our most important findings here is that the *Aspire High* experience caused students to think again and change their minds, which indicates active engagement and deliberation on future plans. It is our sense that an aspirational sensibility is one that is prepared for, and open to, change as well as to be willing to examine and question established habits and values.

Teachers are important to students' learning throughout all 11-13 years of schooling. Although Year 5 and 8 students knew teachers wanted them to achieve, they were less convinced that teachers were interested in them. Large proportions of both Year 5 and 8 students were unsure about what their teachers wanted for them, i.e., whether they finish Year 12, go to university, or get an apprenticeship. In addition, few students reported that their teachers talked with them about careers, indicating a possible gap that needs further investigation and action. Although students knew their parents wanted them to choose a career independently, they were less certain about whether their parents wanted them to go to university or get an apprenticeship. These findings relating to parental and teacher aspirations suggest a lack of clarity and conversation about educational or career aspirations coming to students either from teachers or parents in the middle years of schooling. This could also illustrate how youth develop increasingly limited and nuanced understandings of their own career possibilities that may contradict parents' and teachers' perceptions and guidance.

Whereas it appears self-evident that students should be encouraged to consider a wider range of future possibilities, care needs to be taken about how this should be accomplished. For example, it is the expressed aim of the Australian Government that 40% of all Australians between the ages of 25 to 34 should have a tertiary degree and that 20% of all Australian university students should be from low SES backgrounds by 2025 (Australian Government, 2009). However, such targets can suggest that careers that do not require university education are somehow of lower value (Down, Smyth, & Robinson, 2017; Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011). Such benchmarks also tend to underestimate the social, cultural and economic resources that make higher education more available to some groups than others (Appadurai, 2004, cited in Sellar et al., 2011), particularly for rural and regional youth (Corbett, 2016; Corbett & Forsey, 2017). These problems suggest that the building of aspirations can become a process of 'cultural violence' (Purcell, 2011; Ziplin et al., 2015) and building aspirations can amount to shifting the blame for unemployment from the structure of the economy to the individuals within low SES groups. There can also be problems when

programs for a community are perceived to be introduced by outsiders (Miller, Scanlon, & Phillippo, 2017).

These challenges notwithstanding, we conclude that *Aspire High* benefits this community mainly because it is a local initiative that works in the crucial triad of home-school-community. In addition, the children in *Aspire High* were allowed to make their own choices without any suggestion that one choice was given more value than any other. Recent research in the field of rural education indicates that community based multi-sectoral programming is crucial to meeting the challenges faced by regional and remote students and their families (Miller et al., 2017). Community involvement has sustained in this program since 2013. In addition, employers and other members of the community have been invited to regular, well-attended public exhibitions where students presented posters about their *Aspire High* experience. We see this in terms of what Zipin et al., (2015) referred to as the "funds of knowledge based in local community life", which is key to impacting aspirations in marginalised communities (Gonzalez, Moll & Amante, 2005). While this research reports on data from a snapshot in time about the *Aspire High* program, longitudinal work that follows students through their schooling and that enquires into the multiple and complex influences on their aspirations is required. This is work our team aspires to complete in the future.

Acknowledgement

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