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Overcoming the Challenges of Keeping Young People in Education: A wicked problem with implications for leadership, policy and practice

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ABSTRACT: There has been considerable discussion about retention of students in education beyond Year 10 in Tasmania reflective of the fact that the state has the lowest retention rates for young people continuing in some type of formal education or training beyond Year 10 in Australia. Importantly, the challenges for Tasmania are shared by other educational jurisdictions nationally and internationally, particularly those that share similar economic and demographic
characteristics (Lamb et al., 2015). This article reports on a series of in-depth case studies as one aspect of a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project undertaken in collaboration with the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) examining issues associated with retention, especially for students in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas. Three inter-related themes (viz. sociocultural; structural; curriculum, teaching and learning) are identified that seem collectively and interdependently to play key roles in determining whether many young people continue their education beyond Year 10. The three themes are conceptualised and discussed as a wicked problem: a highly complex educational, social and cultural problem, involving issues that require ‘thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the full range of causal factors underlying them’ (Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), 2007, p. iii). The research suggests that the challenges to effecting positive changes in retention rates in the future are highly complex. Structural solutions alone are not sufficient. Responses, at leadership, policy and practice levels, will also need to address curriculum issues as well as deeply held cultural views and practices evident across various sectors of society, including families, communities and educators themselves.

Introduction and Background

There has been considerable discussion about retention of students in education beyond Year 10 in Tasmania reflective of the fact that the state has the lowest retention rates for young people continuing in some type of formal education or training beyond Year 10 in Australia. Although some efforts have been made to address this situation in the past, these have been essentially structural in nature, and have not made significant differences to educational engagement and attainment. As such, retention continues as a major challenge for Tasmania, with a poor track record impacting negatively on young people (e.g. employment, further education opportunities) as well as the state more broadly (e.g. economically, socially and culturally). Importantly, the challenges for Tasmania are shared by other educational jurisdictions nationally and internationally, particularly those that share similar economic and demographic characteristics.

The research reported here for the government school sector suggests that the challenges to effecting positive changes in retention in the future are highly complex. Structural solutions alone are not sufficient. Responses will also need to address curriculum issues as well as deeply held cultural views and practices evident across various sectors of society, including families, communities and educators. Indeed, the complexities of the challenges for change to the current situation are best conceived as a ‘wicked problem’, one ‘highly resistant to solution … [and where] there are no quick fixes and simple solutions’ (APSC, 2007, p. iii). Importantly, it is clear there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to the required changes, because despite its small size, Tasmania is remarkably diverse.

This article reports on one aspect of a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project, undertaken in collaboration with the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) examining best educational practice in government schools to enhance student retention in education beyond Year 10, especially for students in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas. Noteworthy is the fact that there has been earlier research undertaken in the area (see for example,

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1 For the purposes of this article, retention is broadly defined as students staying in education beyond Year 10 – to be meaningful, retention also embraces the notions of engagement and attainment in education. A stronger definition would require completion of two years of study (Years 11 and 12) post Year 10 (or equivalent).
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Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001). However, the evidence suggests there has been little in the way of significant improvements in student retention and attainment as a result.

The article draws specifically on a series of in-depth case studies conducted in government schools (and their communities) across the state. Three inter-related themes (viz. sociocultural; structural; curriculum, teaching and learning) are identified that seem collectively and interdependently to play key roles in determining whether many young people continue with their education beyond Year 10.

The three themes are conceptualised and discussed as a wicked problem: a highly complex educational, social and cultural problem, involving issues that require ‘thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the full range of causal factors underlying them’ (APSC, 2007, p. iii). The evidence suggests that if Tasmania is going to make positive steps towards enhanced and meaningful engagement of young people in education beyond Year 10, ‘collaborative and innovative approaches’ will be required (p. iii).

Broader Context for the Study

In the rapidly changing and challenging world in which we now live, it is accepted that continuing in meaningful education beyond Year 10 is not only highly desirable, but essential for ‘social cohesion and social prosperity, for economic competitiveness, for employability, health and well-being of citizens’ (Ramsay & Rowan, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013) has noted that:

Graduating from upper secondary education has become increasingly important in all countries, as the skills needed in the labour market are becoming more knowledge-based and as workers are progressively required to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing economy. (p. 42)

This international prioritising of the importance of education is mirrored nationally in Australia through government agreed statements such as the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) and the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009), with the former highlighting the need to improve rates of completion of Year 12 or its equivalent and the latter similarly noting the need for ‘increased participation of young people in education and training’ to be reflected in ‘enrolments of full-time equivalent students in Years 11 and 12’ (p. 5). An important point to note here is that these arguments are not just about continuing in education beyond Year 10, rather they are about completing the equivalent of two years full-time study.

The recent comprehensive study by Mitchell Institute (Lamb et al., 2015) re-enforces the critical importance of completing the equivalent of 12 years of education and the fact that many young Australians are not achieving this goal. Locally, similar sentiments are expressed in Tasmania’s Economic Development Plan which stated that ‘(i)increasing educational outcomes and year-12 retention rates are key to ensuring a skilled workforce and Tasmania’s long-term future’ (Tasmanian Government, 2011, p. 3). The recently elected Liberal state government mirrors this
priority with a policy of ‘[i]mproving retention rates so an extra 2000 young Tasmanians complete their year 11 and 12 studies’ (Tasmanian Liberals, 2013, n.p.).

In short, there is agreement that completing 12 years of study (or equivalent) should be the expectation, not the exception. Currently, despite a variety of initiatives, this is not the case for many young people in Tasmania.

**Tasmanian Research Context**

Tasmania is one of six states and two territories comprising the Commonwealth of Australia. It is the smallest state and has a population of approximately half a million people, the majority of whom are located in the major town centres of Hobart (south), Launceston (north), Burnie and Devonport (north-west), with the bulk of the remainder of the population scattered across smaller communities where agriculture, mining and tourism activities are located. ‘About a third of Tasmania’s population depends on benefits, a third is employed by the public sector, a fifth in the services sector and only a tenth in the private wealth creation sector’ (Schultz, 2013, p. 8).

Like other education systems in Australia, the majority of students attend government schools, with the remainder in non-government religious-based or independent schools. The government sector, where this research is based, typically comprises separate primary schools (to Year 6), high schools (to Year 10) and colleges (offering Years 11 and 12). A small number of high schools offer some Year 11 and 12 subjects. Education is a highly contested aspect of life in Tasmania, with some commentators taking a particularly critical stance while endeavouring to ‘set the scene’ for those from outside the state. West (2013) for example, drawing on a research study noted:

… a large proportion of Tasmanians specified *not* being educated as an important aspect of a ‘true Tasmanian’ … Educated people were regarded as ‘less Tasmanian’ and probably worse people … full of themselves, stuck up and less reliable … education was believed to make them less-likeable people. (p. 57)

Tasmania has the most rurally dispersed population of all the Australian states, creating some challenges for equality of provision of, and access to, education (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2010). Tasmania is also the most socio-economically disadvantaged of all the states as measured by a number of socio-economic indices – including disposable household income, adult and youth unemployment rates. Over one-third of the population receives government public financial assistance (ABS, 2007). Although 86% of the jobs in Australia require a post-Year 12 qualification, in 2007 only 47% of Tasmania’s workforce had that level of qualification.

In 2008, Tasmania’s post-Year 10 retention rates were low, with around 55% of students staying on until Year 12 compared with the Australian average of 62% (ABS, 2008). The Productivity Commission’s (2014) later figures show apparent retention rates for Tasmania for full-time secondary students from Year 10 to Year 12 as 67%, increasing to 93.8% when part-time students are included (for government schools). Data from the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority (2013) indicate that just over 40% of Tasmanians who were of an age to be in Year 10 in 2010 (in government and non-government schools), had completed their Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) by 2013. In other words, less than half of young Tasmanians are ‘graduating’ from 12 years of schooling, or what in other Australian states would be simply referred to as high
or secondary school (Ramsay & Rowan, 2014). This somewhat dire situation is emphasised in the recent Australia-wide work of Lamb et al. (2015) with Tasmania again appearing well down the ladder for Year 12 completion when compared with other states and territories. Some critics see this in a wider social and cultural context whereby ‘Tasmania has developed a way of life, a mode of doing things, a demographic, a culture and associated economy, that reproduces under-achievement generation after generation (West, 2013, p. 51).

The subsequent costs to the community as a whole through lost productivity, ongoing skills shortages, and demands on the health, justice and welfare systems are potentially significant. Various Tasmanian governments have been well aware of such impacts and have attempted a range of policy responses. These have been essentially structural in nature and include the setting up of an Academy and Polytechnic system (Tasmania Tomorrow Project, 2008) by the former Labor government and the current Liberal government’s plan to extend high schools (currently finishing at Year 10) in rural and regional communities to Year 12, thereby ‘giving students a choice whether to continue their studies in their local high school or go to a college’ (Tasmanian Liberals, 2013, n.p.). These responses need to be seen in a context where in Tasmania, education in government schools beyond Year 10 historically has been mainly delivered via separate colleges for Years 11 and 12 to cater for the geographically dispersed nature of the population.

Overview of Literature

Students who are disengaged from education are more likely to give up hope of achieving meaningful and competitive employment in a post-school work environment (MacDonald, 2008). If they become parents, they are likely to pass on these low aspirations to their own children, such that the cycle of disadvantage is perpetuated (Purcell, Wilton & Elias, 2007). This wastage of opportunity is multi-dimensional, having long-term negative economic and well-being implications for individuals, their families and communities. Importantly, recent research has suggested that ‘aspirations have a similar impact on educational outcomes, regardless of socioeconomic status and Indigenous status … [and] … that interventions to lift aspirations of young people should have a similar impact for all young people, including those most at risk of poor educational outcomes’ (Homel & Ryan, 2014, p. 3).

Although there is some evidence to show that post-compulsory participation in Australia has increased across all the target equity groups (Marks, 2008), these groups remain under-represented in higher education, and their share has not changed over the last decade (Bradley et al., 2008; Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Early school leaving plays a significant part in this pattern (Lamb et al., 2004). As a result, addressing retention issues beyond Year 10 must occur well before the students are in the later stage of their education, with research suggesting the importance of educational engagement needs to be an integrated aspect of a student’s ongoing educational program (Winn & Hay, 2009).

Failure of students to connect with their secondary school curriculum (McWilliam, 2008) or to build satisfactory teacher/student relationships (Hyde & Durik, 2005) has been demonstrated to impact negatively on students staying on at school. The likelihood of disconnecting from schooling is further increased if the individual is from a low socio-economic status (SES) community and under economic pressures to find work to survive financially (Swanson, 2009).
Hence, low SES is considered a risk factor in terms of students’ initial and on-going schooling and academic and social development (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2009). Associated with this risk is the concern, as noted earlier, that parents in lower SES communities have lower educational expectations and aspirations for their children, which indirectly influence students’ academic achievement, academic self-concept and career aspirations (Neuenschwander et al., 2007). Students from low SES communities may also fail to connect with further and higher education institutions because of cost, transport, timetabling, and resource limitation (Lamb et al., 2015). Additionally, they may have few role models or others with direct experience of higher education in their immediate family and peer group (Lamb et al., 2004).

As noted above, the importance of community in discussions about retention cannot be overlooked, with research indicating there are community impacts, particularly in rural regions, on students’ aspirations in terms of their education. Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002), for example, explored social capital as ‘a community rather than individual characteristic that is central to the discussions of social cohesion, citizenship and social development’ (p. 46). Moreover, community has a social capital influence on students’ priorities, aspirations and academic achievement (Byun et al., 2012; Semo, 2011). School educators and parents also recognise the importance of being a part of a collaborative partnership, including family and community, to improve student academic achievement and overall engagement in learning, and increased school attendance (Sheldon, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

Some of these factors may be exacerbated in the Tasmanian context because in rural and regional areas, separate post-Year 10 institutions may require some young people to travel large distances to Year 11 and 12 (or senior secondary) colleges and, for others, to move from their homes and board in larger regional towns. These factors have been demonstrated to impact negatively on the aspirations and plans of rural and regional students and their parents (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). The difficulties experienced by post-Year 10 students in separating from their local communities means there are challenges for senior secondary colleges to develop stronger links with Year 7-10 secondary schools and feeder primary schools, and to develop transition programs to meet more effectively the social and psychological needs of rural, regional, and disadvantaged (low SES) adolescents.

Importantly, the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of secondary school teachers have been shown to help shape the post-school pathways chosen by school leavers (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001). Some research suggests that some teachers have low expectations of their students’ capacities to learn (Beswick, 2005, 2007) and these attitudes and beliefs can emerge among groups of teachers working together (Beswick, Watson & De Geest, 2010). Some of these aspects were examined in this study and will be reported on in forthcoming publications.

As leaders of their educational communities, school principals face particular challenges as many are likely to be working in communities that have decades of low expectations regarding education beyond Year 10. In such areas, an improvement in student retention requires the input of school leaders with transformational skills to work effectively with their own teaching staff and with the wider community (Schein, 1999; Sergiovanni, 2000) enacting positive change for their students by changing expectations and aspirations across all members of the community – parents, teachers, students and others. This is a major and complex challenge, with a need for collective commitment and responsibility across all these individuals and groups if real change is to be effected (Branson, 2010).
This overview of the literature serves to highlight the complex interplay and interdependence of an array of issues, indeed forces that potentially mitigate against some students continuing their education beyond Year 10 in rural, regional and disadvantaged communities. These issues or forces can be conceptualised around three interdependent themes: sociocultural (including issues such as individual family and community factors), structural (including issues such as the separation of high schools and colleges) and curriculum, teaching and learning (including school and pedagogical factors). The themes serve as a set of organisers for the issues and it is important to emphasise the complexities and interdependence of them. That is, some of the issues are evident in different ways in more than one of the themes, such is the nature of wicked problems.

Notably, many of the issues identified in the literature have been relatively well known for some time. However, less well understood have been the complexities of the interplay among these and the challenges of attending to their solutions. That is, although policy makers and practitioners might look to the research for answers to the many challenges at play, it is the complexities of those challenges and the ‘wicked’ nature of them that provide significant barriers to change and improvement. The next section examines some of the aspects of wicked problems as they relate to this research.

**Wicked Problems**

In recent years, those problems – usually of a complex social nature – that are not straightforward and lending themselves to rational linear solutions have been referred to as ‘wicked’ (APSC, 2007; Brown, Harris & Russell, 2010). Originally written about some four decades ago (see Rittel & Webber, 1973), such is the acknowledgment of their significance at a government policy level, that the Australian Government prepared a compelling paper recently titled ‘Tackling wicked problems: A public policy perspective’ (APSC, 2007). They define wicked problems as ‘complex policy problems … that go beyond the capacity of any one organisation to understand and respond … there is often disagreement about the causes of the problems and the best way to tackle them’ (p. 1). Key ‘components’ of wicked problems are that they arise in response to a wide range of loosely connected and interrelated factors and the interplay across these factors.

Arguments around wicked problems are that, in contrast to ‘tame problems’ (i.e. straightforward ones), they are not easily resolved by consideration of the facts, as often there are disagreements about just what are the facts, a situation emanating from underlying paradigm disputes among key stakeholders. As such, managing wicked problems is challenging, and it is rarely a matter of ‘fixing’ a problem, rather one of ameliorating it. The notion of ‘fixing’ has been characteristic of policy responses to challenging educational ‘problems’ in the past. These are approaches that are ‘grounded in the idea of a stable and certain world’ (Jordan, Kleinsasser & Roe, 2014, p. 416). As previous research has shown, and as this current research confirms, the issue of retention needs to be considered in a context of complexity and ‘contradiction’ where values, expectations and aspirations are different (Eisenberg, 2006). What also needs to be understood is that problems that are in part embedded in social and cultural contexts such as retention, ‘are never solved, they are simply resolved over and over again’ (Bore & Wright, 2009, p. 245). These notions have significant policy implications for decision makers.

Although inherently complex, some agreed-on ways forward with wicked problems include (APSC, 2007):
the need for collaborative strategies among key stakeholders – engaging the full range of
stakeholders in the search for solutions is essential;

the requirement of holistic rather than linear thinking is required, where interrelationships
are acknowledged and addressed; and,

a realisation that risks have to be carefully managed, and adaptive and flexible responses
are required.

Importantly for this study, wicked problems ‘are unique because they are context-dependent’
(Jordan, Kleinsasser & Roe, 2014, p. 416). This emphasises that there is no ‘one’ answer to
addressing the challenges of retention in government schools in Tasmania. Rather, there are
multiple responses required depending on the contexts under consideration – including the school
and wider social and community contexts within which retention is being examined. Rittel and
Webber (1973, p. 169) argued ‘that diverse values are held by different groups of individuals’
such that what might satisfy one group may be abhorrent to another, and what comprises problem-
solving for one might well be problem-generation for another. Importantly, Munneke et al. (2007)
noted that wicked problems have many stakeholders in their particular contexts with their own
views on problems and possible solutions. As a result, wicked problems are characterised by
having multiple values at stake, with stakeholders not agreeing about their relative importance or
meaning (Jordan, Kleinsasser & Roe, 2014) such that ‘wicked problems have no right or wrong
solutions that can be tested and revised’ (Munneke et al., 2007, p. 1075). Wicked problems are
also typically characterised as being multidimensional with smaller problems nested within a
larger problem; or an assortment of connected problems conglomerating together, so collectively
the individual problem becomes harder to ameliorate. For example, related to this research study,
it was identified that there was a conglomerate of factors that collectively influenced the problem
identified as: students’ low educational aspiration. These related concerns and problems were: (1)
parent support; (2) students’ English achievement; (3) teacher support; (4) students’ level of
confidence about school; and (5) students’ mathematical achievement (Hay et al., 2015).

What this overview emphasises is that for ‘problems’ such as that posed by retention of
students in Tasmania, it is necessary to ‘move beyond simple and formulaic responses (i.e.
answers) for complex (i.e. wicked) problems to a broader, collaborative and more integrated
approach’ (Jordan, Kleinsasser & Roe, 2014, p. 427). These matters will be revisited in the final
discussion of the findings of this piece of research.

The Case Studies

The case studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) on which this article is based form one element of
a wider set of data for the overall study and were designed to:

provide in-depth qualitative data from a range of school and community stakeholders
from targeted schools to examine issues, as identified in the literature, that impact on
student retention beyond Year 10;

identify and explore ‘best practice in action’ (defined as enhancement of retention of
students in education beyond Year 10;
• contribute to better understanding the complex issues underpinning retention beyond Year 10; and hence,
• lead to recommendations for enhancing retention beyond Year 10.

Schools participating in the study were identified by officers of the Department of Education. These were schools where the Department expected initiatives being undertaken in the schools (such as curriculum developments, outreach and transition programs) would be having positive impacts on retention.

Two research fellows, highly experienced researchers, conducted the bulk of the data collection under the supervision of the chief investigators of the project. Regular discussions were held among the research team during and after the data collection activities. One research fellow worked in the South and one in the North/North-West Department of Education regions of the state.

Data for the case studies were collected from a range of stakeholders in 16 schools and colleges. Initially, participants for the case studies were identified by virtue of the particular position or role they held in the school. Others were then identified for involvement by a snowball sampling approach (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006), whereby some of those interviewed suggested others as important sources of data. These participants included:

• principals, teachers and other relevant staff such as Pathway Planning Officers, boarding house managers, students and parents as well as others in the educational community of the schools involved;
• Department of Education General Managers of the regions; and,
• key stakeholders in local government, commerce and industry and other agencies (such as non-government social support bodies) in the selected regions who were connected with their local schools and/or colleges.

In the main, the schools were considered as clusters; that is, local feeder primary, high schools and colleges were involved. The data collected focused especially on those matters identified in the earlier literature review that appeared to impact on retention of students in education beyond Year 10, as well as those actions and initiatives in place in some schools that seem to ameliorate the effects of factors working against retention. Framed by the three overarching themes noted earlier, both the case studies overall and the interview and observation schedules developed for data collection focused particularly on the following four areas:

1. education generally, such as the value and advantages of education;
2. retention in particular, and reasons as to why it is generally low in regional, rural and disadvantaged Tasmania;
3. targeted interventions addressing retention challenges; and,
4. factors impacting on successes and/or providing barriers to retention.

Data for the case studies were collected via (Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2003):

• semi-formal in-depth interviews conducted individually or in small focus groups;
document review – Department of Education, school-generated and other material relevant to retention, such as government statements and newspaper reports regarding retention; and,

- direct observations of programs, classroom practices and other relevant events.

Most interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Some interactions were summarised following discussions. These data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2012; Klenke, 2008) whereby categories, properties and tentative hypotheses are developed and where ‘the data gradually evolve into a core of emerging theory’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 191). This allowed a ‘working’ theoretical framework to focus subsequent data collection.

Importantly, the two research fellows maintained regular contact with each other and with other members of the research team, and met regularly both during and after data collection activities to debrief on progress and engage in discussion about emerging findings. Such discussions aided in the data analysis and informed the direction of subsequent data collection (Klenke, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Presentation of the findings is organised around the three overarching interdependent themes noted earlier. Considering them in this way provides an avenue for critically examining and discussing each theme separately, while appreciating that it is the variable interactions among them in different contexts that manifest in the complexities of the challenges of enhancing retention in Tasmania.

The inter-relatedness of the three themes can be illustrated in Figure 1. Importantly, the figure emphasises the significance of each of the three themes as integral to the quest for students continuing their education beyond Year 10 and, further, that the ultimate goal is not just to continue in education, but to effectively engage in and attain meaningful educational achievement equivalent to two years of study post Year 10.

FIGURE 1: THE INTER-RELATEDNESS OF THE THREE INTEGRAL THEMES

completion of two years (equiv) post year 10 education

continuing in education beyond Y10

educational engagement & attainment

structural theme

sociocultural theme

curriculum teaching & learning theme
The three themes can be broadly described as follows:

1. **sociocultural** – includes issues such as those relating to views about education held by some parents, community members and teachers including aspiration for continuing education and views about what forms of employment are valued;

2. **structural** – includes issues such as physical and geographical separation of high schools and colleges and operational barriers such as college time-tabling; and,

3. **curriculum, teaching and learning** – includes overall coherence and understanding of curriculum from a K-12 perspective, pedagogy, teachers and the curriculum.

**Sociocultural theme**

Some of the key factors to emerge under the sociocultural theme included historical cultural factors, poverty and unemployment, beliefs about and attitudes to education, and real and perceived opportunities available to young people when they leave school.

Synthesis of the data collected across the various sources as noted above led to the identification of the following matters for this theme:

- beliefs among some parent, community members and teachers that education, certainly education beyond Year 10, is neither desirable nor necessary – this cultural view is historical, generational and evident in particular segments of the community; notably, however, there is evidence of some changes to this cultural view as traditional work opportunities disappear;

- changing employment opportunities due to economic and industrial decline in some areas of the state mean education is viewed more positively than in previous times;

- poverty and unemployment impact on families’ priorities and hence educational aspiration and engagement;

- there are socio-economic and generational challenges for many in the Tasmanian community – in essence, priorities other than continuing education are driving some families;

- education for some is a low priority such that absenteeism from school is acceptable if attending is seen as too difficult;

- some parents and community members hold less than positive views of opportunities afforded to young people from engaging in education beyond Year 10;

- the presence of highly valued (among some) cultural activities, such as Year 10 leavers’ events, in very powerful ways symbolise and celebrate the end of schooling for some young people; and,

- in essence, for many students (and their families and communities), retention has not been normalised, that is, it is still talked about as an issue to be dealt with by them, by government, by the department – staying on at school beyond Year 10 has not been the norm for many students, rather it has been seen as an exception.

Although the issues noted above are essentially framed as barriers for some students in continuing their schooling beyond Year 10, the data suggest that schools in the case studies are
aware of them and are making efforts to ameliorate their impact on retention. However, there remain on-going challenges as to how effective any local and systemic responses might be in enhancing retention, and importantly, how sustainable they will be over time, particularly as many are concerned with matters beyond the immediate influence of the school. As a result, collaborative and sustained efforts will be required across schools, families and communities drawing on support from government and non-government agencies.

### Structural theme

For this theme, key issues to emerge from synthesis of the data included: changes to the school leaving age, employment and training opportunities, structural separation of high schools and colleges, transport and accommodation for students attending college, and programs in place that directly or indirectly ameliorate low retention.

Synthesis of the data collected across the various sources as noted above led to the identification of the following matters for this theme:

- The Department of Education at a systemic level, and individual schools and colleges have implemented a range of programs aimed at enhancing student (and family) commitment to and engagement with education, from the early years on; current programs are rated positively across the board as making a difference for many students.
- However, often the lack of continuation of funding and fragmentation for such support services/programs for students impact on their on-going availability.
- The physical separation of schools across primary school-high school-college locations can present as a barrier to continuing in education for some students and their families.
- Perceived and real geographical isolation of students from schools and colleges are barriers for some students – accommodation and transport issues then become significant for some of them.
- The relatively recent raising of the school leaving age to 17 means the traditions and educational expectations of many parents were formed by their experiences of leaving school at 15 or earlier.
- Some students (families) are disengaging from education well before transition points such as high school to college – for some this occurs in early primary school.
- Transition processes from high school to college are mixed in terms of longer-term effectiveness of retention/engagement of students in schooling.
- College-centred issues act as barriers for some students in some locations – these include the college time-table which results in high levels of free-time for some students; a lack of structure in learning (compared with high school) that impacts negatively on some students (e.g. low engagement with studies and for some non-attendance).

As for the sociocultural theme, most of the issues noted above are essentially framed as barriers for some students in continuing their schooling beyond Year 10. However, it is clear that the schools in the case studies are aware of these barriers, and are making efforts to ameliorate their impact on retention, including support to students in education and career planning, visitations across schools for students and mentoring of students to encourage them to continue.
their education. Key challenges for many of the special programs in particular will be how sustainable they are over time, particularly as many rely on funding for their continuation. Another key challenge lies in the transition point from Year 10 to Year 11. It is important that this be made as easy as possible for students because it is the critical starting point for those aiming to complete their Year 12 studies.

**Curriculum, teaching and learning theme**

There is general agreement across schools and colleges that appropriate and relevant curriculum and associated pedagogy are critical for enhancing engagement, retention and attainment of students in education. However, a number of factors are evident that work against achieving these ends for some students. These include that the curriculum provision in some high schools that offer Years 11 and 12, particularly in rural and remote areas, is limited by a high turnover of teachers and school leaders and/or lack of teachers capable of teaching in particular curriculum areas, such as mathematics and science.

Synthesis of the data collected across the various sources as noted above led to the identification of the following matters for this theme:

- Schools and colleges have introduced a range of programs to address the learning needs of their students and respond to contemporary curriculum initiatives, such as the Australian Curriculum.
- Schools and colleges seem to introduce their curriculum programs in isolation from each other, leading to a lack of overall coherence in the curriculum across the primary school, high school and college years; in particular, there is limited professional exchange across high schools and colleges whereby experiences and expertise may be shared.
- Some students face quite different educational experiences in colleges compared with those in high school years; as a result there may be an intellectual leap and differences in teacher support between high school and college which may leave some students ill-prepared for college.
- Stronger academic focus in colleges and the need for students to work more independently present challenges for some students whose high school experiences have been characterised by high personal support (social welfare) and lower academic expectations (compared with college).
- Teacher quality and the professional learning of teachers are critical ingredients to providing high quality and appropriate curricula and pedagogy for students in schools and colleges.
- Literacy and numeracy standards (content, teaching-learning) appear as particular issues for some students – there is a concomitant issue here regarding the lack of trained mathematics and science teachers.
- High levels of teacher and principal turnover are issues in some schools.

Students’ educational experiences in schools and colleges are critical to their engagement and continuation with their studies. Differences in these, especially across high school and college, provide barriers for some students as they encounter the different learning environments and
academic demands of their studies. Greater professional interaction between high school and college teachers to share experiences and expertise may contribute to better understandings about the curriculum in the two sectors resulting in greater coherence and enhanced educational experiences for students and leading to enhanced retention. In this regard, the quality of the curriculum, the teachers themselves, and their capacity to engage students in meaningful sustained learning are central to the challenges of retention.

Discussion and Conclusions – Implications for policy and practice

It is clear that factors and issues relevant to the three inter-related themes (sociocultural, structural, and curriculum, teaching and learning) seem collectively and interdependently to play key roles in determining whether some young people in Tasmania continue with their education beyond Year 10, and indeed successfully complete the equivalent of two years of school in Years 11 and 12. While some evidence is available of apparently successful interventions (such as locally developed responses among schools, communities and non-government support groups, e.g. mentoring programs for students, literacy and numeracy support programs) that are making a difference for some students, there remains considerable work to be done to effect significant change in retention levels more broadly.

The questions for these successes are: how sustainable are they and how transferable might they be to other contexts? Importantly, none of these successes deals simplistically with just one or two of the themes identified; rather, they are multi-faceted and take a long-term view of the necessary change process. These aspects require on-going evaluation to monitor what actions schools and communities find are the most successful for the longer term.

It could be argued that the structural issue of the separation of high schools from colleges, when coupled with a variety of other factors, looms large as a critical barrier for many students. For example, a student with low aspiration, who needs to travel some distance from home to college, and who is from a family and community where the valuing of education is low, is less likely to complete a Year 12 qualification successfully than a similarly located student with high aspiration and an educationally supportive environment. That is, there is a range of ameliorating factors that are likely to act either as facilitators or barriers to students continuing with their education beyond Year 10. Many of the barriers may be minimised if students can more seamlessly continue with their education after Year 10.

In considering these themes, it is understood that context (e.g. social, geographical, economic) in particular impacts to varying degrees on the significance of these themes for differing groups of young people, that is, context matters when considering retention. The overwhelming sense is that the issues that need to be considered are complex and interdependent.

The complexities and challenges of the issues, and the interactions across them are indisputably multidimensional and steeped in the histories, behaviours and cultures of communities (educational and otherwise). It is for these reasons that the challenges are well conceived of as a ‘wicked problem’, understanding that there are no quick fixes nor simple solutions to a range of what are highly complex interdependent factors at play. Taking this view is not to put the challenges in the ‘too hard’ basket, rather to appreciate that responses must be built on creative and collective thinking and action.
In such problems, there are often disagreements about just what are the facts, a situation emanating from underlying paradigm disputes among key stakeholders about issues, such as the principal purposes of schooling/education. As such, addressing the wicked problem of retention will be challenging – and it will require mindsets among policy makers and practitioners (teachers and school leaders) to shift from ‘fixing’ the problem to one of ameliorating it as the challenges are not located in stable and rational contexts, rather they are located in complex and unpredictable ones. This will require strong leadership by principals and community leaders to address the challenges. What also needs to be understood is that problems that are in part embedded in social and cultural contexts such as low retention ‘are never solved, they are simply resolved over and over again’ (Bore & Wright, 2009, p. 245). The research reported here provides some suggestions for ways forward to address the retention challenges in Tasmania. It is clear that in these there are significant policy and practice challenges for politicians, decision makers, school leaders, teachers and the community.

With these ideas in mind, some of the overarching messages to emerge from this research as possible ways forward include the following:

- The Department, and many schools (both primary and high) and colleges and community groups have attempted a range of responses regarding retention, some successful others less so – there is much to be learned on the ground as to what works in particular contexts and why. Although some evidence is available in this regard from this study and elsewhere, to effect change more research is needed to understand not only what successful schools and their communities are doing by way of processes, but also to identify the underpinning issues they have successfully overcome.

- An ultimate goal must be to normalise the notion of completing two years of schooling beyond Year 10 in the minds of students, parents and the wider community – this expectation has been articulated by governments as well as many others, yet in Tasmania it is still seen by some in some parts of the state as something special to achieve such educational outcomes.

- The potential barriers identified in this research need to be carefully considered across the many different educational and community contexts in the state, and collaborative responses developed and resourced.

- The historical, geographical and cultural diversity of Tasmania means that one-dimensional responses across the state are unlikely to have the desired impact, that is, locally developed responses, drawing on some of the findings from this and other relevant studies are much more likely to improve retention.

- Understanding, accepting and a willingness to address the issues by all stakeholders is critical to moving forward.

- The three interdependent themes identified here highlight the highly complex nature of the responses required in some areas of the state to make real changes to prevailing retention levels, e.g. changing deeply embedded cultural values around education for some families and communities will not be an easy matter.

- Given that context is such a critical component in exploration of responses, the challenges for schools to make local decisions to accommodate local barriers are
significant. As a result, school leadership and the professionalism of teachers are strongly in the spotlight for change.

- Retention is not just an educational issue – it is a whole-of-community issue that needs whole-of-community responses. Leaders and stakeholders across the board need to engage with the issues and collaboratively develop responses.

- New thinking and new energies are needed for more creative decision making. At the local level, school leaders in particular have critical roles to play in this regard.

- Some agreed ways forward with wicked problems, relevant here, include: the need for collaborative strategies among the full range of key stakeholders in the search for solutions; holistic rather than linear thinking, where interrelationships are acknowledged and addressed; the need to manage risks carefully; and the generation of adaptive and flexible responses. (APSC, 2007)

Finally, the research reported here, in some sense, identifies little that is very much different from earlier work undertaken by others (e.g. Abbott-Chapman, 2011). Indeed, the findings are likely to be similar to those evident in other areas of Australia and elsewhere where many of the contextual factors are similar to those in parts of Tasmania. Given this, the question is posed as to why, if we have long known about many of the issues and barriers regarding greater retention of students in education beyond Year 10, Tasmania remains with the lowest such attainment in the country? One answer must lie in the responses and the ways in which they have been conceptualised, developed, implemented and sustained.

Careful reflection of the three themes identified here, and the argument that the ‘problem’ needs to be approached with a different (i.e. wicked) mindset for leadership, policy and practice responses might lead to greater and longer-lasting success in the future. There is a clear need for ongoing research at both the local and systemic levels to carefully examine the ‘characteristics’ of successful school and community responses to the retention challenges in the state. With the ‘right’ mindsets and genuine commitment across all the relevant stakeholders, this current research, together with studies conducted earlier in the state, should provide a sufficient platform for positive policy and practice changes leading to more sustained efforts to keep young Tasmanians in education for longer.

REFERENCES


