

# Remote Island Students' Post-Compulsory Retention: Emplacement and Displacement as Factors Influencing Educational Persistence or Discontinuation

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*Through ethnographic research using grounded theory we examined social, cultural and locational factors which result in low post-compulsory retention rates of remote island students. The research, conducted by an island "insider," followed a cohort of Australian students from Year 10 in a small island school off the coast of Tasmania to Year 11 in a secondary college on the Tasmanian mainland. The research investigated factors, identified by the students, that influenced their transition from Year 10, the final year of compulsory schooling, through to Years 11 and 12, and their persistence or discontinuation. Attachment to the island as their home place and the emplacement of their cultural ties to family and community contrasted with the displacement experienced in the urban environment. This was felt especially strongly by indigenous students, who made up a third of the cohort. The research offers insights into the socio-spatial ambiguities experienced differently in different social contexts by students seeking a better education and the opportunities of urban living and at the same time longing for the island and island community. Findings are discussed in relation to research literature on the social construction of place, place attachment and the implications of place conscious education of rurally remote students.*

This research investigated the push/pull factors associated with young people's temporary out-migration from a remote Tasmanian (Australian) island at the end of Year 10, to pursue post-compulsory secondary education in Years 11 and 12, or vocational education and training, at institutions in a city on the Tasmanian mainland. We asked students what were the most important factors influencing their transition from Year 10 to Year 11, and how they perceived the advantages and disadvantages of their home community, compared with the advantages and disadvantages of the town to which they must move to pursue education beyond Year 10. We also asked how their perceptions of, and aspirations for, their post-school career paths related to their sense of identity and belonging or not belonging in the process of migration between the rural and urban environments. The island students' experiences of the educational transition process, and their subsequent academic outcomes, emerged as closely linked to their attachment and sense of belonging to place and community in both the sending and receiving

places, and to their experiences of location and dislocation.

Traditionally, islands have had a distinctive relationship with migration – the out-migration of local residents seeking education and employment (and sometimes returning) and the in-migration of tourists and “sea changers” seeking a way of life that is relatively unspoiled by the processes of industrialisation and globalization (King, 2009). The impact of modernity and globalization tears space away from place by fostering relationships between absent others, spatially distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction (Giddens, 1991). Compared with the “homelessness” of modernity (Malpas, 2006), in rurally isolated communities space and place largely coincide and “the close-knit local relationships of rural communities are still salient features of many young people's experience” (Wierenga, 2009, p. 26).

This applies especially to small islands, where the sense of specialness is related to being peripheral to larger land masses surrounded by water. Close-knit communities, strong local culture and identity, and associated insularity, are characteristics of islands (King, 2009). In listening to students' voices as they described the transition from island school to urban college, we used a grounded theory

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approach in seeking explanations of the cultural dissonance and stress that many rurally remote students experience in adjusting to new and unfamiliar surroundings (Dees, 2006). What we found was a range of interrelated social, spatial, economic and personal influences on individual choices and responses, which varied with socio-spatial context. This paper focuses upon sense of belonging to a particular place, or “place attachment,” and local embedding or *emplacement* of relationships, especially indigenous (Rumsey & Weiner, 2001), in both the sending and receiving communities. We recognize here that place is a social construct, and a sense of place, and place attachment, are linked to cultural values and social capital attached to particular places “that provide important symbolic as well as practical frameworks to life” (Fog Olwig, 2002, p.125).

Sense of place is associated with activities, relationships and memories that link personal identity and self efficacy with physical setting (Low & Lawrence-Zumiga, 2003; Stedman, 2002). For indigenous peoples “the so-called inanimate world is alive with ‘being’” (Lehman, 2008, p.107), giving places special cultural and spiritual significance. These socio-cultural practices and beliefs emphasize identity and belonging as part of the continuity of past, present and future, and accentuate the displacement experienced in separation (Rumsey & Weiner, 2001). However, Greenwood (2009), quoting a Crow Elder, argues that non-indigenous people who are long-settled in a particular locality may also experience a deep emotional attachment to place, land and the relationships that are emplaced there as the “power of the spirits coming up from the land begin to speak to them” (p.5). This applies especially to rurally remote areas.

The multiple definitions of “rural” and “remote” are often associated with an urban-centric, deficit view of geographical remoteness (McConaghy, 2000; Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2003; Pratt, 1996). Rural youth tend to downscale their aspirations in conformity with this image. Rural parents and children traditionally aspire to vocational rather than academic streams of education and training, and highly practical curriculum options (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009) with a view to children entering the local job market early and so becoming financially independent (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). The lack of availability of local jobs is a significant factor in deciding whether or not to stay in the local area at the end of schooling, so that formal education and mobility out of rural areas are inextricably linked (Corbett 2007, 2009). Students and parents are often ambivalent about children having to leave the locality for further education and training, in case the migration should become more permanent. Youth out-migration is also in conflict with efforts to re-vitalize otherwise aging and declining rural communities (Gabriel, 2000). This means that young people as migrants from rural places fall between two worlds and experience “hybridities

of identities and places” (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p.83). In addition, they carry into the urban context a rich overlay of memories of places and activities, contributing to visual identification with place as “text” carried into new situations (Reynaud, 2004).

Place conscious education, in curriculum and pedagogy, counteracts the dis-embedding (Beck, 1992) and “performative culture” of global capitalism (Lingard, 2010) and recognizes other measures of personal success as well as formal academic credentials, in ways that are compatible with community culture (Greenwood, 2009; Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). In pursuit of the twin goals of social justice and environmental sustainability place conscious education recognizes spatial as well as cultural diversity in education and challenges the locational homogenization associated with economic globalization. Removal of people from landscapes that are the source of their personal and cultural identities represents a threat to their cultural heritage and sustainability of the natural environment with which they have a symbiotic relationship (Semken & Butler Freeman, 2008). However, we should not romanticize rural places. It is imperative that young people have equitable access to education and training opportunities, wherever they live, in order to be able to develop to their full human potential, and to access local, national and international job markets (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

In rurally remote Australia, students who suffer the twin disadvantages of rurality, especially rural isolation, and low socio-economic status have been shown by research to be most under-represented in post-compulsory education, to a degree which has changed little over the last fifteen years (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (indigenous) students in rural and remote areas of Australia suffer the greatest inequalities in educational outcomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Freed & Samson, 2004; McConaghy, 2000). Inequity in education provision in rural and regional areas is linked to the metro-centric nature of teacher education and higher education provisions (Green & Reid, 2004) and difficulty of attracting and retaining teaching staff in rural locations (Mills & Gale, 2003).

While parental academic attainment and family social capital are associated with different levels of school achievement (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001), strong home-school partnerships, along with school and teacher expectations for their students, may mediate the effects of low parental education levels, poverty and ethnicity, and are important for student engagement and achievement (Abbott-Chapman, 2007; Barley & Beaseley, 2007; Chisholm, 2003). Such partnerships are difficult for rurally isolated parents to maintain once their children leave the

local school to attend college, because of distance and cost of travel. In consequence, students miss out on the socio-cultural interaction of home and school (Lee & Bowen, 2006), and the emotional support provided by contact with family members (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Therefore, as part of a repertoire of support strategies to reduce the achievement gap and increase retention (Lareau, 2001), institutions strive to increase the involvement of remote parents who, though socially and spatially distant, are genuinely interested in their children's education (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002).

Although an examination of the interaction of spatial and social factors cannot tell us the whole story with regard to rural student retention, nevertheless "spatial analysis can help us to reach a greater understanding of critical processes in education at the micro level" (Ferrare & Apple, 2010, p. 216). At the same time, those who "integrate spatial relations into their theoretical understandings must be willing to accept that there will be times when 'space matters' and times when it will not" (p. 212). In our study, degree of place attachment was not found to be in itself the deciding factor of whether students' educational transition experiences were positive or negative, but its influence, combined with factors such as personal confidence, health, access to islander social networks and ability to find part-time employment, was profound.

### **The Research Context:**

#### **Tasmania, the Island and Island Identity**

The island on which the research was conducted between 2000 and 2004 is classified as Very Remote (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003) and is situated off the coast of Tasmania, the island state which lies off the south-eastern tip of the Australian mainland. The main sources of livelihood on the island are farming, fishing and tourism, especially eco-tourism. Since 1996, the population has declined by 13% from about 1,000 persons to about 850 in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The trend to out-migration, especially of young people seeking work, is a matter of local concern. Young people who leave the island may return when they are older and when there is full-time work available, demonstrating the attachment to place common among island people. Leaving the island represents a significant physical and psychological journey, as the island can only be reached by small planes and a weekly boat delivering supplies. Most mobile phone connections are unavailable and satellite dishes are required for TV and internet reception. This increases the sense of isolation and remoteness.

Tasmania, as a whole, has a sparse and dispersed population of about half a million people in a land mass the size of Scotland, has a largely rural economy and is the most socio-economically disadvantaged of all the states as measured by a number of socio-economic indices (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Bureau of Rural

Science, 2008). Tasmanian Year 10 to 12 apparent retention rates have historically been some of the lowest in the country. In 2001, the rate of 70.5% was second lowest after the Northern Territory (64.9%) and a national rate of 75.4% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, p.18). By 2009, the Tasmanian rate had dropped to 64.1% - comparative rates were Northern Territory (62.3%) and national (76.6%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a, p.12). Indigenous students have lower retention rates than non-indigenous students. In 2002 Year 11 and Year 12 retention rates of Australian indigenous students were 58.9% and 38.0% compared to 88.7% and 76.3% of non-indigenous students. By 2009, despite Year 11 participation increases of indigenous students, a significant retention gap remained, especially at Year 12, with 45.4% (indigenous) and 77.3% (non indigenous) retention (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010b, p.24). A significantly higher proportion of the island population self-identify as Aboriginal (17.9%) than in Tasmania (3.5%) or Australia as a whole (2.3%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Archaeological evidence suggests that Aboriginal people have lived in Tasmania for around 40,000 years and were separated from the Australian mainland around 12,000 years ago when the land bridge connecting Tasmania to the continent was submerged. After the British invasion of Tasmania in 1803, the Bass Strait islands were identified as a source of fur seals and whales. The seal hunters were lawless and forcibly abducted Aboriginal women from the Tasmanian mainland as concubines. The offspring of these Islanders were to become Straitsmen, proud descendants of whom still inhabit the island (Murray-Smith, 1987). In 1834, an Aboriginal settlement was established on the island by the government as a means of "civilising and Christianising" the 134 aborigines exiled there. In 1847, the survivors were transferred to Oyster Cove, south of Hobart, the capital of Tasmania. The colonization of the island was marked by injustice and violence - and the site of the original settlement still holds a sense of sorrow and dispossession (Ryan, 1996). Descendants of the early tribal Aborigines and Straitsmen, including those returned from the mainland, maintain pride in their identity, culture and land. Aboriginality is defined by self identification, acknowledgement of ancestry and recognition by members of the Aboriginal community, and not through visual appearance or skin colour. Over time, the term "Islander" came to be used as an alternative to "Straitsman" and eventually to include long settled non-Aboriginal inhabitants, some of who arrived as soldier settlers after the Second World War, with the aid of government land grants. All of the indigenous Tasmanian languages have been lost. The analysis of islander identity is complex and nuanced.

Since the island's tragic beginnings, islanders have worked hard to repair rifts and heal wounds. Strong attachment to the island is a feature of both indigenous and

non-indigenous culture and values. In 1995, the Tasmanian government passed the Tasmanian Lands Act (National Archives of Australia, 1996, p.1) which “acknowledges the dispossession of Tasmania’s indigenous people and recognises certain rights of Tasmanians of Aboriginal descent.” It also acknowledges the “historical fallacy that Aboriginal people were eliminated from Tasmania by British colonisation.” The Act provides for an elected Aboriginal Land Council to own and manage land of historical and cultural significance, including land on the island, along with the island’s Aboriginal Association. The island community was one of the first in Australia to participate in the National Reconciliation process between non-indigenous people and the First Australians, by flying both the Aboriginal flag and Australian flag at the local airport – a Council decision supported by the island population.

### **Schooling on the Island**

A community (government) District High School (DHS) caters for primary and secondary students until Year 10, after which students wishing to continue their education at the post-compulsory level must move away, at about 15 years old, to a government senior secondary college in the city (population 103,000) on the mainland of Tasmania. Parents are naturally concerned to find appropriate accommodation for their children, either in student hostels or boarding with relatives. Parents of higher socio-economic status who live in rural and remote parts of Tasmania tend to send their children to non-government boarding schools (either Catholic or Independent) at secondary level at Year 7. About 30% of students in Tasmania attend non-government schools. Thus the students remaining in the local District High School are largely from middle to lower income families. At the time of the research, the island school student population was under 200, 25% of students were Aboriginal, with 11 full-time and part-time teachers. Since the research, the population of both the island and the school have continued to decline.

Ties of friendship and trust bind cohorts of students into a strong community culture, of which the school is an integral part. The school has traditionally been characterised by a warm and caring atmosphere in which students and their families are valued by the teachers, who are also members of the community. Closeness of student-teacher relationships accentuates the rift that occurs when the students leave the school and the island to pursue further education and training, despite the urban college’s supportive culture which values diversity, and the provision of a wide range of social welfare and health services on campus.

### **Research Design and Methods**

The research was longitudinal and conducted by mixed qualitative methods by the first author while a senior teacher at the island school, where she had taught for 25 years (Stewart, 2004). The research originated in the analysis of

student written work and classroom discussion within a Year 9 course on “work studies” that was designed to prepare students for future studies and employment beyond the island. Students’ stories of island life and their aspirations for study and work raised questions for the teacher/researcher about how likely students were to achieve their study and work goals. As a teacher, she had observed over a number of years that students with high aspirations who did well academically in their island school were often among those who did not complete Years 11 or 12, returning to the island without post-school qualifications. Research questions generated through initial naturalistic classroom enquiry “designed to study interaction in the world of everyday life” (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 167) were further refined through research literature reviews.

The Year 9 students who had participated in the Work Studies course were invited to take part in interviews in Year 10 before their move to the urban college and again towards the end of their Year 11 studies. All of the 16 students agreed to take part and their parents’ permission was gained. The program of interviews was supported by the researcher’s extensive research memos for continual reflection and re-interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006) and informal discussions with students’ parents and teachers as “peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account” (Cresswell, 2003, p.196). A conceptual and theoretical framework derived from grounded theory and phenomenology was adopted, in order to capture the ever-changing realities of students’ lives as they perceived them and in order to give them voice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

### **The Research Sample**

A year cohort of 16 students, nine girls and seven boys, whose average age was 15 years in Year 10, participated in the study, and none withdrew over the three years. There was no need to ask students in interview to identify as Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal because the researcher already knew the background of five students whose families openly claimed Aboriginality. All participants were English speakers. Twelve of the students had lived on the island all their lives, and had been classmates all their school years, while three students had re-joined the school after a time away and one had recently arrived on the island.

### **The Student Interviews**

Both the pre and post transition interviews were semi-structured and lasted about an hour. The first student interviews were held during Year 10 as the students faced the prospect of moving to the city for Year 11 education or training. Questions in this interview covered students’ education and employment aspirations, what they thought they would be doing and where, the following year, in five years time and in 10 years time. The students were also asked

what they anticipated finding in the urban study environment and to discuss any obstacles they anticipated having to overcome in pursuit of their goals. Open-ended questions were sequenced in a way that would enable students to tell their stories freely and to outline steps they felt were needed to achieve their future plans without leading their responses. Interviews were recorded, with the students' permission, and transcribed. The second interview was conducted towards the end of Year 11 after transcription and interim analysis of first interview data was completed. This allowed the researcher to gradually identify analytical categories or themes and to develop a second interview schedule "grounded in the views of the participants" (Cresswell, 2003, p. 221) as part of the iterative cycle (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The second interview was designed to monitor student reactions to the transition process, so that new data gathering, refined data analysis and reflections upon the previous year's interviews overlapped. Boeije notes, that in the cyclical nature of qualitative research "it is important to notice that the steps do not form a linear process but can be found in all the research phases" (2002, p.408).

Interviews were held when the students returned to the island on vacation in their homes or at school. Broad ranging questions covered impressions of the college and the city, how far expectations matched lived reality, current visions for the future and whether aspirations and views of obstacles had changed in relation to both education and part-time employment. This allowed monitoring of students' shifting perceptions of factors which encouraged or discouraged their study persistence, and their own evaluation of their academic progress. Student interview responses (in the opinion of the researcher who had known these students for most of their school lives) showed trust and honesty. The impact of place attachment, of emplacement and displacement, were recurring themes in student responses. The analysis of interview transcripts and data from subsequent fieldwork within the school and wider community revealed both positive and negative ways of considering these as factors affecting persistence or discontinuation depending on the different social and place contexts. These complex dualities, represent the nuanced and sometimes contradictory facets of the transition experience.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The authors are well aware that research among disadvantaged peoples, especially indigenous, requires great sensitivity and empathy in the application of Western hegemonic academic practices that define and shape knowledge in ways that are alien to the subjects of study (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The first author brought to the research an "adopted" Islander's appreciation of, and

respect for, island culture and values, and recognized the research participants and their families as co-creators of shared knowledge. Though not herself indigenous, she has formed relationships of mutual friendship and respect with indigenous members of the community, including the parents of indigenous students, which have continued since her retirement. As a longstanding resident, teacher and artist, whose husband was the only doctor on the island for nearly 30 years, she is active in community affairs and in promoting indigenous art and traditional crafts. Aboriginal women elders have honored her with an Aboriginal name as a mark of respect and affection and have invited her participation in "secret women's business" which cannot be divulged to non-Aboriginals (including the second author of this paper). Her position affords privileged insights into both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal islanders' sense of belonging to land and place and their views on children having to leave the island for education and/or employment. Her co-author, as research supervisor, has visited the island and been welcomed by both indigenous and non-indigenous community members. From an academic perspective, the researcher's "insider" role represents a potential source of bias in interpretation of findings but can also be regarded as "useful and positive" (Cresswell, 2003, p.200) so long as the researcher's position and values are publicly known (Stewart, 2010). The researcher employed multiple strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the data collected and of her own first interpretations of the data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) which involved constant interrogation and testing of the researcher's assumptions throughout data gathering and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The researchers acknowledge the challenges and pitfalls of highly personal and sensitive research, which faces challenges of rapport development and listening to untold stories, involving self-disclosure and feelings of vulnerability (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were paramount, involving protection of student and family privacy and confidentiality and the establishment of trust and confidence in the researchers, the research process and its outcomes. As well as approval from the University of Tasmania Ethics Committee, we gained local approval for the project and a commitment to the research goals through a number of prior community consultations including Aboriginal Elders. In these, we discussed the study's aims and intentions, and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation. During these consultations, community members were assured that no one would be identified in reporting or publishing findings. In honoring this undertaking, we decided not to

Table 1

*Interim Categories Derived from 43 Initial Codes*

- 
1. Concerns about physical/social/emotional separation from home on the island
  2. Lack of money and the ability to manage it
  3. Fears and concerns about the new physical environment
  4. Fears and concern about the new social environment
  5. Perceived lack of social skills
  6. Perceived lack of intellectual skills
  7. Yearning for place of retreat
  8. Longing for local identity in space and place
  9. Dependence for friendship and support of friends from the island
  10. Dependence for friendship and support of friends from the new environment
  11. Inability to find employment in the new environment
  12. Concern about the lack of safety in urban areas
  13. Degree of confidence in approach to the future
  14. Planning to return to the island
  15. Sickness/stress and disorientation
- 

publish findings for at least 5 years, until all young people taking part in the study had passed through the educational system and could not be identified.

#### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analysed using the constant comparative method, central to the grounded theory approach, in breaking down, examining, comparing, and categorizing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding techniques and strategies were used to develop criteria, construct analytical categories and clusters of categories and discern relationships between them in a process which “culminates in a ‘grounded theory’ or an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p.4). The initial or “open” data coding of interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) interrogated first reading meanings informed by students’ written classroom texts about expected positive and negative aspects of attending college in the city, and the obstacles they anticipated having to overcome to achieve their goals. In this process, 43 items were coded. Texts were then re-examined, responses to coded items counted and a shorter more ‘focussed’ list of 15 categories produced, as seen in Table One above.

A four-stage coding approach – Open or Initial coding, Focused, Axial and Selective Coding - was used in moving beyond the researcher’s initial readings to underlying concepts and ideas, with dimensions and properties of these concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Focused coding used “the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to synthesise and explain larger segments of data” (Charmaz,

2006, p. 57). Axial coding was then used to put the data back together in new ways “by making connections between categories”(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.96) and to “sort, synthesise and organise large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p.60) into a smaller number of themes. Selective coding of the emerging themes was then used to discern the essence of the story as voiced by research participants and to search for explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At successive stages of the process of coding, refining, journal writing, observation and reflection comparisons between individual responses in interview one were combined with comparisons between student responses in interviews one and two, in order to assess the relative significance of themes over time and in different contexts. After coding, responses were counted, contextualised and compared with initial observations and codes, and re-interrogated in a series of tables that provided a check on the researcher’s underlying assumptions (Charmaz, 2006).

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Research findings are presented and discussed with full recognition that, as the research was confined to one geographical and cultural area, a remote island off the state of Tasmania, and as the study sample was small and purposively selected, findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. Further research is needed to discover whether the findings are more generally applicable. It is also acknowledged that holding both the pre and post interviews on the island may have influenced student comparisons between island and city life in ways that cannot be measured given the present data.

## Results

### Post-Compulsory Retention of the Island Cohort

Strong academic and social preparation given to students on the island involved teachers' and parents' practical support through school orientation programs and opportunities provided for parent/teacher interaction and consultation. The strong home-school partnership resulted in a 100% transition rate of the cohort from Year 10 to Year 11, which was a great achievement and higher than the national rate. One student said, "My mum is actually pretty happy about me going away to college, but she thinks, same as me, that I need to get my act together and get good results." Said another, "My mum didn't really have the chance to go to college, and she wants me to do it and she pushes me in a way to do it." Tracking the 16 students' academic careers over three years revealed the greatest discontinuation during Year 11, with retention rates comparable to those of other rurally remote and indigenous students. Of the 16 students in the study, eight completed Year 11 and seven completed Year 12. Notably, it was not always the lower academically achieving students, in terms of their island school results, who returned home without completing. However, local opinion was that to have participated in Year 11 study away from home was in itself an achievement. Non-completers returned to the island and found casual employment or were, at least temporarily, unemployed. One student had a baby. The students were accepted back into family and community without overt criticism, and became once again part of the social fabric of island life, but with the added benefit of their experiences of the wider world when they had been away, and the possibility they might go again in the future. Their horizons had broadened.

### Student Aspirations and Expectations Revealed in Interview One

In the first interview, before they left the island at the end of Year 10, all students were optimistic about the future, focusing on their career aspirations, their desire to travel and see the world and gain new experiences. All were positive about the transition to Year 11, felt they were academically prepared and that their parents supported their choices. Teacher/parent discussions also revealed that parents had high educational expectations for their children and saw great value in education, despite many being of low socio-economic status and having achieved lower levels of education themselves. All the students initially had plans to continue their education in the following year - 15 students to a secondary college (Years 11 and 12) and one to a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college. They knew what courses they would be studying and where they would be living - seven in college hostels, three would stay with elder sisters, three with ex-island students in a rented

house and two hoped to arrange private board.

Student views and expectations for the immediate move appeared realistic, but longer term plans were hazy, tempered by lack of confidence in their ability, and the possibility they might fail to achieve the required academic results to progress from Year 11 to Year 12. Research has shown that student perceived competence has an important impact on study persistence (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009). Five students thought that in five years they would be progressing to university or a Vocational Education and Training course, and three expected to be members of the Australian Defence Forces (Military). Out of the 16 students, only three thought they would have moved back to the island - the rest thought they would still be in the city, other Australian states or overseas. Student aspirations for living in the city had a dream-like quality, like something they had seen on TV. At the same time their sometimes exaggerated fears about personal safety were also influenced by media.

Some career choices appeared less realistic than others (from a teacher's perspective who knew them well) in terms of student achievement, interests and motivation. Despite extensive career counselling, classroom discussions and teacher advice on qualifications necessary for chosen careers, some students appeared to cling to an unrealistic wish-list. This was particularly true of what they thought they would be doing in ten years' time, a distant period during which students saw themselves as being released from island social restrictions, and free to do as they pleased. Students sometimes mentioned relationships, marriage and family, but more often they imagined being able to own and drive cars, have money, drink alcohol and to enjoy a "good lifestyle."

The students saw the challenges of academic transition to Year 11 study as less problematic than the practical challenges of living in a completely new and alien environment in the city where "nobody knows you." They feared feeling "strange" in the city, "not being able to find places," of heavy traffic and not being able to catch the right bus (most never having had to catch a bus), of being among crowds of strangers, of getting lost with associated threats to personal safety. In brief, they feared being "dispossessed" of place and identity and of the social competences associated with knowing and being known in the home place, and of missing family, friends, pets, familiar teachers, and classmates who were left behind. Student uncertainties about practical skills in everyday living were frequently revealed, for example, through anxiety about not knowing how to handle money or how to spend it wisely, and questions about whether they would not have enough to live on if they could not find part-time employment. Students have little use for money on the island and little experience with budgeting, buying necessities, or managing money for everyday living. Some students' said they were not confident that they would be

able to resist the temptation to spend their money on costly entertainment, and if presented to them, alcohol or drugs. A quarter of the students worried that they would not get up in time to get to classes or meetings without family help because of the lack of importance given to “clock time” on the island.

### **Key Themes, Issues and Concepts Emerging from the Analysis of Interview Two**

By the time the second interview was conducted, after several months at college, much of their apprehension about courses of study and new teachers had dissipated and a new-found confidence in coping with the teaching/learning situation had emerged. A minority still found the going tough, but overall the school preparation they had received stood them in good stead. Some, faced with new opportunities and options, had found the courage to change their course and were benefiting from this, seeing new opportunities. “I felt pretty certain I wanted to be an Early Childhood Teacher – but now I just don’t know – I have all these other options to consider.” Students spoke positively about how college studies were not as hard as they expected, and those who had changed their courses were confident their revised pathways would lead to success at college and in future careers. It was evident that students were better able to recognize their academic skills and match them to careers than they had been in the previous year. Thus, the demands of academic study did not in themselves create pressure to discontinue. However, concepts of closeness and distance, as well as time, were being re-defined and created uncertainties. Compared to their small school, the size and complexity of the college and its many course offerings seemed daunting to most students. Situations in which students found themselves in crowds of unknown people, who were spatially close but socially distant, presented problems and anxiety. For example, the first assembly of hundreds of students was terrifying to students who had never experienced being with so many people at one time and in one place. Three students did not participate in the first assembly because “there were too many people in there.” One was amazed that there were more students in class than all of the secondary students on the island.

The support of friendly teachers and the Home/School Liaison Officers helped overcome difficulties and built student confidence about their ability to reach educational goals. However, the formality of the college and its classrooms was unfamiliar. One student said about the first assembly, “The Principal goes ‘welcome to the school’ and that, but we found out more from the older students.” Another student said: “College was just like – it was just more sitting down –like every class - you sat down!” The need to make appointments in order to receive guidance or help was off-putting to some students. One student said, “The Home/School Liaison officer was good but she didn’t

seem, like, accessible – she was always behind these closed doors.” Students were diffident in relating to new teachers saying, “Teachers can’t push you to achieve because they don’t know your capabilities. They can’t say ‘I know what you are capable of’ because they don’t.”

Just organizing the day and getting to classes on time proved a challenge. Despite time being crucial for city living, island students found punctuality difficult. Islanders are generally about 20 minutes late for an appointment as time is fairly fluid. Said one student, “It’s a lot faster in the city and you’re rushed and everything.” Another said, “You gotta learn how to manage your time – on the island I didn’t have to – in the city you have to buy a watch!” Being lost on campus and in the city was mentioned frequently. Students had been taken to the college on orientation or “taster” days when they were in Year 10 but were accompanied by adults. Trying to find their way about alone and manage bus travel was difficult. Some students also said that entertainment events and shopping crowds were distressing and threatened them with feelings of enclosure rather than the freedom they had imagined. Comments portraying disorientation were frequent. A typical comment was, “You can be walking along and there will be this big gush of people, and they’ll spin you around or whatever, if they’re trying to pass you and you can lose yourself and forget for a second where you are.”

In addition, accommodation experiences proved problematic for half the students. Hostels were found to be an inadequate replacement for home, rules and regulations were resented, and students housed apart from their island friends said they were lonely. One student said, “In the hostel, I didn’t know anyone and I was like really shy and probably stayed in my room a lot, never went out, never spoke to anyone.” Students missed family, friends and pets even more than they thought they would. Use of money, and not having enough of it, was a problem for 11 out of the 16 students. Part-time jobs that they needed to help finance themselves through college proved hard to find, unlike on the island where family and community networks made finding casual work easier. This created anxieties about not supporting themselves.

Fear of crowds and threats to personal safety in city streets were general matters of concern. Said one student, “The island’s really safe – you don’t have to worry about anything and you sort of know everyone. In the city, you don’t know what’s going to happen, what everyone is like and what they’re going to do.” The island students also found that city students who did not know them were not friendly. Said one, “I was going to college and thinking – well I must go all out to be friendly and go up to anyone and say ‘Hello’ and ‘I’m (name) How are you?’ Well, some of them just told me to ‘F... off!’” The contrast to the friendliness of the island was stark. Most students received



government financial and travel support but were able to travel home only for major vacations. When they returned home on vacation, the contrast hit them. "You just come home and there's people – everyone you know and it's just – it brings a lot more warmth I suppose."

Ten out of the 15 students said they actively missed their life on the island in a way that reflected "place-sickness," not just home-sickness. "Being an Islander means I am part of something. I feel as if I belong somewhere." Five were Aboriginal students (100% of the Aboriginal students) and five were non-Aboriginal (50% of the non-Aboriginal students). Students missed particularly the freedom to roam the island in safety and their many and varied outdoor activities associated with their place, their land and their family. While the students appreciated the freedom the city offers in terms of the ability to act individually and to exert independence, they missed the freedom of open countryside and the opportunity to "be themselves" in outside spaces which are at the same time 'private' and special, as opposed to the "public" spaces of the city (Abbott-Chapman & Robertson, 2009). Typical comments were, "I miss being able to go outside and have that wide open space to myself –you know- look at grass –believe it or not you miss grass," and "I miss the beach and I miss the ocean something chronic and I just miss the quietness you know." The Aboriginal students particularly emphasized that on the island being alone is not loneliness. Loneliness means separation from your people and your place. Combined with this was fear that separation from all they had known might become permanent. Fifteen out of the 16 students said they longed for a place of safety and retreat such as they enjoyed on the island, and a few found their retreat by sleeping a lot or by using prescription medication to combat depression. The separation from "my place" on the island was strongly felt for short periods while in the city, then relieved for short periods during vacation breaks back on the island.

The highs and lows of place attachment and detachment made settling-in a very slow process. It also contributed to feelings of losing social competence and concern that teachers might see them as not coping. The students' sense of being deskilled was very real, as what they were good at was unable to be demonstrated in the new situation. By Year 10 on the island most students, both male and female, could turn their hand to anything practical and gain skills they would not have gained in the city. Most were capable with motors and machinery, and 10 of the cohort had experience of paid work – on farms shed handing, hay collecting, cattle work, fencing, hotel work, abalone lease work, gardening, waitressing, post-office assistant, supermarket shelf work and child-minding. Yet in the city, they found it hard to find part-time work to help support themselves. This hurt them financially but also deprived them of the sense of independence and self reliance they were used to on the

island. In the second interview, 11 students (69%) made 46 references to money, the inability to handle money and the lack of money. This was compared to 26 references in the first interview. Students found that their needs exceeded their available funds. Food, clothing, travel and entertainment were their major items of expenditure. Most students voiced their disappointment at being unable to find part-time work in the city, in view of the financial commitment parents had made, and were concerned that parents might find it necessary to ask them to return home.

The sense of threat to physical safety of the crowded places of the city added to this loss of independence and resilience. The fact that open and isolated spaces on the island made students feel safe, while enclosed and crowded spaces in the city made them feel unsafe (Abbott-Chapman & Robertson, 2009), underlines the complexity and contradictions emerging from the grounded theory analysis. Students' fears that the potentially exciting and 'liberating' environment of the city would also prove dangerous were justified by events. One student was attacked in the street, one student witnessed a fatal accident, and one student was chased by a car full of shouting hooligans. Island students revealed that they kept together as small groups both at college and in public places. Those who socialized with non-islander students witnessed the prevalence of underage drinking and drug abuse at student parties and felt threatened by the out of control behavior they witnessed as a result. One student said, "Some of the friends we know have gotten into drugs and stuff and it's just yeah – you see them go off all stupid – they just don't know what they are doing." Another student said, "I told Mum that she'd sent me to a mental institution!" Given the young age of the students it is not surprising that parents are concerned about the quality of supervision their children will receive away from home.

In finely balanced emotional and social situations, it does not take much, either positive or negative, to swing the balance either way – towards staying and persisting with studies or going back to the island and discontinuing. The experience of illness or injury, for example, the impact of which had previously been underestimated by the researchers, emerged from interview analysis as contributing to the students' negative feelings about being away from home. Half the students reported suffering health problems which appeared to have worsened compared to problems they acknowledged in the previous year. These manifested themselves as exacerbation of chronic illnesses, recent diagnosis of medical problems (such as diabetes), depression related to changes in circumstance, injury, and increased exposure to infection from a larger population. These episodes of ill health unavoidably interrupted study patterns, dampening aspirations and future plans. Students affected were concerned about their inability to cope and tended to lapse back into the lack of confidence they had

Table 2  
*Identified Dualities Underlying the Thematic Categories*

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1. Location and displacement
  2. Freedom and lack of freedom
  3. Fear and lack of fear
  4. Familiarity and lack of familiarity
  5. Support and lack of support
  6. Mastery and lack of mastery
  7. Island culture and city culture
- 

felt at first, despite continuing parental and teacher support and encouragement.

#### **Complex Dualities in Relation to Different Social and Place Contexts**

The extent to which students view place and place attachment as positive or negative, appears to vary with socio-spatial context, as the relationship between places, relationships and identities “vary over contexts and over time” (Sondergaard, 2002, p.199) and memories of the “other” place are taken forward (Reynaud, 2004). For “context is the encounter which produces new outcomes and preludes to further encounters” (Seddon, 1993, p.32). The resulting ambiguities and dualities across a spectrum of experiences on the island and in the city are expressed as “hybridities of identities and places” (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p.83) as reflected in the categories in Table Two above.

These discursive dualities help us to understand and to explain student responses to their transition experiences, their study persistence or discontinuation and the delicate balance of pressures of attraction and repulsion in which they were caught as migrants between the two worlds, expressed spatially and socially. The analytical process proved complex because in ascribing students’ interior meanings to complex dualities, the researcher was interpreting their perceptions of the “other” and their expressed “positionality” (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p.77). In addition, students’ discursive dualities represent an alternative reading or “unspoken subtext” which implicitly challenges structural categories and taken-for-granted assumptions (Gergen, 1994, p.12).

**Location and displacement.** Dislocation or displacement, for example, may be seen to refer both to the physical and psychological loss experienced away from the island and also to the isolation or alienation experienced within the urban environment. The move to the city was seen by the students as both positive and negative, as opportunity and threat, at different times and in different contexts. Perspectives adopted depended on a host of other experiences and access to support networks.

**Freedom and lack of freedom.** The dualities of freedom and lack of freedom combined similar contradictory qualities. Moving to the city involved redefinition of personal boundaries through curtailment of freedom of physical movement previously enjoyed on the island and social mobility in a community in which students and their families were known and accepted. Conversely, the freedom in the city from parental supervision and island social norms, where expectations of community members always need to be considered, offered a taste of a new life. The freedom to attend movies, “eat takeaways and buy anything you want” was contrasted with the restrictions imposed by the lack of money mentioned by 14 of the 16 students.

**Fear and lack of fear.** The dualities of fear and lack of fear in regard to safety concerns also revealed complexities, in that the trust and safety experienced on the island disguised the fact that eventually students must become independent, make their own way, develop and trust their own competences, wherever they live. Students misjudged their feelings of mistrust and fear in the city as evidence of their lack of preparation and weakness instead of the psychological response to danger that aids in survival. This demonstrated their relative inability to anticipate and avoid risk in completely new situations. Their lack of perceived social competence included their difficulty in handling situations in which fellow students became out of control under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

**Familiarity and lack of familiarity.** Thirteen of the 16 students thought that lack of familiarity with the new school system and city environment would probably be a hurdle to overcome. This related to the social and spatial environment and the sense, which many later experienced, of feeling lost. Feeling lost was the result of not having clear expectations or false expectations which were not borne out by experience, and covered a range of practical matters including school organization, accommodation, part-time employment, management of time, transport, money and meeting with large numbers of strangers. As expectations clarified during Year 11, assisted by new friends, and teachers, familiarity, competence and sense of closer involvement with the new

environment grew, but at the same time changed the lens through which island places and relationships were viewed at a distance, rendering them less familiar to the returning students. Students varied in their ability to manage this attenuation of relationships and related sense of similarity and difference, which they experienced as they moved back and forth between island and city ways of living.

**Support and lack of support.** The dualities of support and lack of support also proved paradoxical. Students saw the supportive island community as giving them confidence to move away and maintain a sense of identity, a springboard from which to seek new experiences. But it was also seen as binding them to the mutual responsibilities and obligations in family and community, and therefore as pulling them back. One Aboriginal student for example, conscious of the responsibility of young people towards older relatives, felt that if she did not return to the island she would be unable to fulfill her traditional role as supportive family member. The sense of self vested in the home, placed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, gave them strength to face the unknown and to develop new urban skills but also called them back to their cultural roots.

**Mastery and lack of mastery.** The dualities of mastery and lack of mastery cover a range of academic and social contexts in which students sought to become more informed and competent in making choices for themselves, and re-positioning themselves within hegemonic western educational structures. The removal from island culture, security and tradition meant being faced with personal choices in place of established norms and expectations. A student said that being sent to school in the city was “like being thrown out of the nest before you learnt to fly.” Students required to make new choices in an alien situation, where once they would have relied on the knowledge and identity resources of social capital, became doubtful of their ability to follow their chosen path. They also worried about letting anyone, including teachers, know. One student said, “It’s hard to tell people when you think they’ll be disappointed with you.” The other side of the coin is that students’ mastery over country skills, which were a source of pride on the island were not recognised or utilised in the city.

**Island culture and city culture.** The contrast between island and city culture as seen through students’ eyes highlighted their understandings of real location and idealised location – the difference between where you are now and the “other” place, whether island or city. These real and idealised places shifted in meaning depending on where the students saw themselves as being based at any one time. Seen from the island, the city was an exciting place of new opportunities and new freedoms from which ties to the island were holding students back. Seen from the city, the island was a place of comfort, security and freedom

to which to retreat from city fear, pressure and ambiguity. In the first interview, students wanted both to leave the island and to stay. In the second interview, students wanted both to leave the city and to stay. Even slight changes in personal, social or financial circumstances and in feelings of health and well-being or social competence could swing the balance either way.

## Conclusions

This research has shown the ways in which place matters to island students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in a myriad of ways, despite the homogenising tendency of urban-based policies, pedagogies, practices and curriculum (Corbett, 2009). Emplacement of relationships, aspirations and sense of belonging to the family and local community emerged as important aspects of social and cultural capital, especially in relation to the “alternative ways of knowing and living” of indigenous students (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p.51). The importance of supports for successful emotional as well as academic transition to post-compulsory education have been shown to be essential in the programs of both the sending rural and the receiving urban institution (Christie, 2009). This is highlighted by the fact that some of the island students who were performing well academically, and whose aspirations before leaving the island were high, were among those who discontinued their study during Year 11.

The strength of homesickness of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, not only for family and friends but for the island itself, was exacerbated for some students by periods of ill health with associated interruptions to study, resulting in loss of confidence. This was accentuated by weakening of peer networks, financial hardship exacerbated by inability to find part-time paid employment, and related sense of de-skilling. Despite earlier student and family recognition of the opportunity offered by college education, a successful transition from Year 10 at the island school and an early adjustment to Year 11 studies, this cascade of issues served to undermine students’ sense of efficacy and identity in the city and to increase their desire to return to the island. The physical and psychological separation from family and island networks and the inability to access these readily at times of need proved crucial.

Key findings revealed that student perceptions of place and their attachment to place varied with social and spatial context as they adapted to the experience of migrating between the island and the city. The significance of cultural and social values in the home place anchored them on the island and the hopes and expectations for new lifestyle and freedoms, to which they saw education as the key, attracted them to the city. The discursive dualities and ambiguities of living in two contrasting places created the “hybridities of identities and places” which are characteristics of migrants (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p.83). The cultural transition

between educational levels and institutions was thus made more complex and difficult because it involved physical migration between two very different places in which the familiar and the alien were continually at odds and continually being redefined

For example, practical issues surrounding conceptions of time and place, including formal requirements of being in a certain place at a certain time, proved central to a range of student dualities and misinterpretations. These hampered their progress, and increased doubts in their own competence and self efficacy. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) highlights the differences between western and indigenous concepts and language of time and space, which apply here to the island student responses. The Western compartmentalization of time and space, based on mathematical concepts, is at odds with the thinking of many indigenous peoples who see “positions within time and space, in which people and events are located, but these cannot necessarily be described as distinct categories of thought” (p.51). For island students time and space are relational not categorical.

Academic performance, in itself, was therefore not sufficient to guarantee student completion of Year 11 and entry into Year 12, without resolution of some of the ambiguities and contradictions experienced. The building of new social networks, new spatial and temporal routines and new urban social competences assisted this resolution. The seven students who went on to complete Year 12, at least one preparing to go on to University, were able to work through the challenges and problems of new situations, tolerate at least for a time their home-sickness and place sickness, set up good study habits and routines in stable living arrangements, find part-time employment and forge for themselves new and supportive friendship relationships which linked them with social networks beyond the island group. This also involved the development of a dual city/island identity. The magnitude of their achievement cannot be overestimated. However, the achievements of the students who returned home after their Year 11 studies, in some cases “just to take time out” should also be recognized. From the standpoint of the institutions of formal education, those who returned home were seen to some extent as a “loss,” but the returners and their families did not perceive their return in this way. Time spent “away” had equipped them with new study and life skills and new insights into what they would need to do, at a later date, to achieve their goals. They had experienced achievement, both academic and social, which would prepare them for whatever they went on to do on the island or in the city.

### **Discussion**

The student experiences highlight practical lessons for educators about the socio-spatial context of student learning, identity and self-efficacy. Island students’ lived-

in stories demonstrate how the relative inability of the education system to accommodate their social, spatial and cultural needs means that quite small disappointments or perceived failures can swing the balance towards dropping out. Tackling problems of student retention demands a nuanced approach towards “the little things that add up to mean a lot” (Wierenga, 2009, p. 184). The celebration of local knowledge and skills and the engagement of teachers and students with their communities and their region have been shown to be ways of making education more relevant and a “real force for improving the societies in which we live” (Brooke, 2003, p.5). Place conscious education need not restrict aspirations and mobility within urbanized, globalized societies (Gruenwald & Smith, 2008). Rather, it helps strengthen individual self-worth and identity and equips students to travel anywhere in the world and take their local place identity with them.

In practical terms, this means that while rural and urban places of education are regarded as different, they should not be regarded as separate and unequal but as interconnected and of equal value, and resourced by governments as such. Induction and preparation of both students and teachers may then be seen as two-way and interactive. Examples include the possibility of short-term rural/urban teacher exchanges to experience at first-hand the teaching/learning situation, community and culture of the “other place”, and the “twinning” of rural and urban schools enhanced by interaction through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The development and increasing use of ICT, distance and on-line learning and the reduction of the rural/urban digital divide will encourage synchronous communication and collaboration between schools and colleges as Communities of Practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) and so enhance place conscious education (Anderson, Timms, & Courtney 2007; Sampson, 2005). Linking isolated and urban schools through the Internet contributes to student learning environments and supports school transitional programs (Maher, 2010). All these activities exemplify the extensibility or stretching, of sense of place (Relph, 2008), and provide a positive framework for practical strategies to increase urban place familiarization of rural students. Relph argues that the deep epistemological changes required by post-modern society require us to think in new ways about the sense of place and the relationship between places. “What is needed is a pragmatic sense of place which blends an appreciation of place identity with an understanding of extensibility, and seeks appropriate local sources of action to deal with emerging social and environmental challenges” (p.321).

Other practical strategies include pastoral care counsellors giving students who are studying and living away from home the opportunity to share hostel accommodation

with students from the same locality and offering individual coaching on the management of money, use of public transport, protection of personal safety, importance of “clock time”, punctuality and regular class attendance. Also helpful are programs of peer mentoring in which older students from the same or a similar locality support first year students and help them acclimatise to the new institution by introducing them into new friendship networks and accompanying them to large scale formal assemblies. Rural students benefit from co-curricular activities outside the classroom, especially outdoor education, involving work with animals. All of these practical provisions require a “whole of institution” approach that values place conscious education, and encourages students to remain connected to their home culture, sense of belonging and identity, while learning to operate in an increasingly globalised and homogenising world.

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