Australian Rural Pathways Advisors: Narratives of Place and Practice

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Abstract

Pathways advisors play an important role in assisting students to successfully transition from secondary school to tertiary study or employment. It is timely to explore the role of rural pathways advisors with the renewed calls for rural students to receive better preparation and support for the transition to work in, for example, the *Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (2018)*. Not enough is known about the support structures in schools, how teachers become pathways advisors, and the work they do. The literature reveals that careers education needs to be contextualised (Irving, 2012) and that pathways advisors need to be advocates for social change. With many rural communities struggling with changing economic futures and persistent issues of social justice affecting rural students (Cuervo, 2016), the role and work of rural pathways advisors requires deeper consideration.

This thesis explores the experiences of six pathways advisors in rural Victoria, Australia through the use of narrative inquiry. Participants reflected on the various aspects of their role during unstructured interviews which were then re-storied by the researcher to highlight key themes. The re-storied narratives were then sent to participants to ensure their accuracy. Using narrative thematic analysis informed by Riessman (2008), the re-storied narratives were explored through a conceptual framework that utilised Reid et al.'s (2010) rural social space model and Cuervo's (2016) pluralised conceptualisation of social justice in rural schools. Findings showed that there are widespread, fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of rural pathways advising. Pathways advisors require a solid understanding of their communities which is developed over time and through extensive interpersonal relationships. This knowledge and these relationships situate the pathways advisor in a power position in their community, with the ability to advise students about their future prospects if they stay locally or leave for other opportunities. The data also indicated that participating in local professional learning networks consisting of other pathways advisors, tertiary institutions, and community groups can serve as a way to improve their practice and knowledge base. These networks can also serve as a vehicle to act collectively for improvements in recognitional justice. Implications of this research are grounded in the need for greater recognition of the work of rural pathways advisors. This can be accomplished through an increase in meaningful participation and consultation in the decision-making processes concerning their work.

Author Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

Print Name: Melyssa Lynn Fuqua

Date: 16 October 2019

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Prologue: Becoming a Rural Pathways Advisor

I grew up on a hobby-farm in western Massachusetts, in what I considered to be a relatively rural context. Tall Pines Farm was located in the forested foothills of the Berkshire Mountains with a stream running through it and plenty of snow in the winter. We had llamas, a goat, and a dog. Despite living on a farm where we could not see our neighbours from the house, we were only a 20 minute drive to major shopping centres. When I left Tall Pines, it was for my university studies in Hartford, Connecticut then Athens, Greece. After university, I moved to Melbourne, Australia to earn my teaching qualification because it seemed like a good adventure. I decided to stay to gain some teaching experience and I found a new home in Wyben.[1] The small, rural community in western Victoria was located amongst large flat grain paddocks, which were brown most of the year, especially so during the drought. The nearest regional centre was an hour away and major cities were five. Wyben's entire population was the same as the enrolments in the high school I had attended. I had swapped snow days from school as a student for extreme heat and fire warnings as a teacher. In short, my experiences with education and understanding of rural were far different to those of my students.

After living and teaching in Wyben for nearly a decade, I had the opportunity to become the school's pathways coordinator. The role entailed overseeing the school's careers education program and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) which is the traditional subject-based senior school (Years 11 and 12) curriculum. Eager for a challenge and a change in roles, I accepted and was bolstered by the then-principal's endorsement that I would be fine since I was "good at paperwork." It would be fair to say my preconceived notions of the role did not always align with the reality. Understanding the nature of this role proved more difficult than expected and several pressing problems emerged immediately. What exactly was careers education? How was I meant to advise my students on relevant tertiary study or career pathways when I was unfamiliar with the options and processes myself? How could I help my students imagine jobs in careers that were not located in town or may not even exist yet?

[1] Pseudonym – The names of all towns who have educators participating in this research have been replaced to preserve their anonymity.

I felt I needed more knowledge and training but found there were limited options. Given the amount of continuously changing speciality information and skills that are necessary for the role of pathways advisor, I was surprised to find it was not a requirement for Victorian government schools to employ an accredited career practitioner. At that time, I identified three options for professional learning: postgraduate degrees and certificates, short courses and other external professional development usually provided by the Career Education Association of Victoria (CEAV), or on-the-job informal learning. I did not think a postgraduate degree or certificate would be of immediate assistance. The CEAV offered occasional professional learning opportunities in Melbourne but were not convenient to attend. So, much of my on-the-job learning came in the form of advice from other educators in my school and through participation in my local careers network (henceforth referred to as the Network). The Network was one of a number of regional careers networks that were composed of "school-based members plus representatives from TAFEs [Technical and Further Education] and universities, other employer organisations and Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) representatives and meet monthly or quarterly" (CEAV, 2019).[2] I found the wealth of local knowledge and support to be invaluable.

Aside from the practical advice and professional relationships I developed through the Network, deciding how to develop and implement a pathways exploration program that was suitable to my school was made more difficult by the sheer volume of information from various external organisations. This included initiatives by various government departments, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) – as well as admissions centres from other states and territories, the CEAV, commercial organisations, and individual tertiary institutions and industries. Everyone seemed to have "helpful resources" but sorting the good from the bad was tricky since there did not appear to be clear policies to follow and I had no formal training. I often worried I would miss something important in the deluge of pamphlets and emails. Victorian schools have autonomy to decide the content and time devoted to pathways exploration. Between 2010 and 2012, a series of frameworks and resources regarding careers education were created by the government. The most notable of these is the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs' (MCEECDYA) *Australian Blueprint for Career Development* (2010) which

[2] LLENs are a DET program whose goals are to support and improve engagement, participation, and transition outcomes for teenagers. As of 2019, there were 31 around Victoria.

"is a framework that can be used to design, implement and evaluate career development programs" (p. 9). However, from my experience most of these resources were lost amongst the noise of all the others; I was only aware of the Blueprint shortly before undertaking this research project.

Despite developing my content knowledge about careers education curriculum and the tertiary application process, I did not grow comfortable in the role. As I reflected on why, I discovered it was my sense of being an Outsider, a foreign metropolitan Other that was affecting my confidence. The role was a reminder that even after living in the community for nearly a decade, I was not a local. I was still trying to learn about the locally available jobs – this was a far different type of farming than I had known. I felt that my experiences from other places in the world were beneficial in my teaching of the Humanities and English, but less so when it came to pathways. I had become acutely aware of my accent again, especially when I explained tertiary options to students and their families. I worried they were concerned that since I was not a local, I did not understand their community and so should not be advising their children about their futures. The professional learning from participating in my Network added to this unease since being rural and the associated challenges in accessing a variety of opportunities for my students and myself were frequently the focus of meetings. One of the most significant lessons I learned was the passion and ingenuity necessary for rural pathways advisors to begin to make a dent in the inequality of opportunity facing our students.

My perceived outsider status impacted the way I went about my job, prompting me to learn more about my community and the future that faced my students. Rather than give up in frustration, I tried to reframe my thinking. Being an outsider allowed me to view the challenges of rural pathways advising from a different angle; I could use this perspective to question norms and bring fresh ideas. My reflection and reframing of this role, along with the difficult process of figuring out what I needed to do and how to make it relevant to my students, have been catalysts for this research.

1.2. Introduction

In this chapter I provide the context and aims of this research. This includes introducing how I use two key terms – rural and pathways advisors – followed by an outline of the contextual considerations for rural Australian communities, the changing nature of work, and

Victorian public school careers education policy. I also detail the need for this research since relatively little is known about the relationship between rurality and pathways advisors. Finally, I state my research questions and outline the structure of this thesis.

1.2.1. Terminology used in the thesis.

Two of the key terms in this research – *rural* and *pathways advisor* – have varied and complicated definitions. Often they are not clearly defined, so it is important to clarify my understanding and use of these terms in the thesis.

1.2.1.1. Rural.

My use of *rural* reflects the more nuanced definitions and is based on Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space that considers rurality based on a place's unique demography, geography, and economy. My use of *rural* is not meant to be taken as simply not-urban, but rather one that is defined by its people. In short, in this thesis I use the term *rural* because it is the term participants used to describe their place, as well the term I used to describe the region while I lived there. This is despite these towns not meeting the Australian Bureau of Statistic's definition of rural[3]. In Chapter Three and in Appendices J and K, I provide more contextual detail about the specific rural places involved in this research.

There are many, often conflicting, definitions of what constitutes *rural*. Definitions range from the simple dichotomy of urban/rural (Gulson & Symes, 2007; Reid et al., 2010) to the more detailed distinction between regional, rural and remote (Sullivan, Perry & McConney, 2014) to the most nuanced, but more difficult to operationalise, intersection of place, space and social justice (Green & Letts, 2007; Roberts & Green 2013). Further still, some argue that rural is more than a simple matter of geography. Reid et al. (2010) and Thomson (2000) argue that rurality involves a complex interaction of economy, geography and demography, meaning that no two communities are the same. They also urge the need to move past the damaging stereotypes associated with the rural 'problem' in order to recognise the complexities (Reid et

[3] The region in which this research is located is classified as 'outer regional' in the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure.

al., 2010). Anderson and Lonsdale (2014) stress that rural is not fixed and involves a variety of considerations such as a community's location, small population, distance from services, cultural diversity, and socioeconomic status. In the past two decades, there has been an increasing focus on definitions and conceptualisations of *rural* that have drawn on socio-spatial theoretical lenses to explore the diversity of rural areas (for examples see Cuervo, 2016; Green & Letts 2007; Reid et al., 2010; Roberts & Green, 2013; Somerville & Rennie, 2012; White & Corbett, 2014). These examples build on previous, crucial conceptualisations from Halfacree (2006) who argued that rural is "inherently spatial" (p. 44); Gruenewald's (2003) focus on place-conscious education; Moll, Amanti, Feff and Gonzalez's (1992) "funds of knowledge;" Soja's explorations of the socio-spatial (1980) and *thirdspace* (1996); and Letts, Novak, Gottschall, Green, and Meyenn's (2005) contention that discourses and practises are located in "social, cultural, spatial" (p. 220) settings. Finally, Biddle and Azano (2016) point out that "rurality, as a concept, has changed in meaning… as the social and economic context itself has changed" (p. 316), highlighting another – temporal – dimension necessary for the conceptualisation.

In the discussion surrounding the definition of rural, it is not as important to decide on a single definition as it is to appreciate the inherent value-judgements cloaked in some of the terms. Many definitions appropriate 'normal' and 'desirable' with urban, thereby devaluing the rural and setting up a powerful, deficit-based model through which to view rural issues (Reid et al., 2010; Roberts, 2014; Roberts & Green, 2013). Utilising a definition that rejects the deficit model acknowledges the social injustice that often plagues rural communities. By defining rural as simply not being urban, it ignores the important considerations of things like distance from services, population density and cultural diversity (Thomson, 2000). Such definitions do a tremendous disservice to the richness found in rural communities.

As a final note in terms of defining rural, the term *community* and my usage of it also needs clarification. Somerville and Rennie (2012) identify it as "an overused, ill-defined and contested term" (p. 194). In this thesis, I use *community* to refer to the social space of the town each school is located in since communities are "not thing-like products but *living processes* wherein socially interactive and communicative people (re)create things and practices, and invest them with sense and meaning" (Zipin, 2009, p. 324, emphasis in the original). Here, *community* means more than the streets and buildings in a specific postcode, but additionally the people and relationships.

1.2.1.2. Pathways advisors: Careers education and educators.

My other key term – *pathways advisor* – is used as an umbrella term that covers the variety of titles and tasks described by the participants. While each participant had their own job title, for the sake of clarity, I decided on pathways advisors as an encompassing term because the other more common titles, for example 'careers advisor' or 'guidance counsellor', did not satisfy the variety and complexity of the roles. I also chose 'pathways advisors' over 'careers development practitioners', which is often used in the literature and is the term preferred by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), because that term can refer to professional advisors who do not work in schools. It is important to clearly distinguish between professional advisors – those who work in private career-planning businesses or in other areas of government or social services – and those who work in public schools. Most of the participants were teachers with the pathways role in addition to other duties. Half of the participants did not hold qualifications to be career development practitioners. So, in this thesis *pathways advisor* refers to teachers and education support staff in schools who develop and provide programs about post-secondary school pathways and careers to students. Their tasks include a combination of: conducting student interviews about subject selection and transitions out of school to tertiary study or work, organising Work Experience[4], fulfilling paperwork requirements to secure funding for careers-related activities, data entry and analysis, team leading, and/or other senior school responsibilities such as VCE, VCAL, and VET[5] coordination, and overseeing the careers education curriculum (if any) within the school. With such a wide scope of responsibilities, a broad term was necessary. I refer to their work either by specific task or more generally by the term pathways exploration programs to encapsulate what they do in their schools. Since the programs vary from school to school, a generic term seemed appropriate.

Another part of my reasoning behind using pathways advisors as my preferred term is the volume of terms associated with the work of my participants. The terminology that is used

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[4] In Victorian schools, Work Experience is a program where students spend time in a workplace to explore an industry in which they may want to pursue a career. In this research, participating schools offer students in Years 10 and/or 11 the opportunity to spend a week in their placement each year.

[5] These are the three main strands of learning in upper secondary school to obtain a high school qualification. The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is the traditional, university-track qualification. The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is the alternative track for students wishing to directly enter the workforce rather than attend university. The Vocational Education and Training in Schools (formally VETiS, but is used in this thesis in its colloquial form: VET) program allows students to undertake qualifications in addition to their VCE or VCAL studies to gain skills and a qualification in a particular industry.

across the field is often used in contradictory manners depending on the origin of the text, both in time and space. Further uncertainty is created when terms evolve into newer ones and are then used interchangeably such as 'career education' and 'career development.' Career development tends to be the more modern phrase, and is used in the document *The Australian Blueprint for Career Development*, but both are concerned with theoretically based curriculum designed to upskill students to make informed, lifelong decisions about their work life (Irving, 2010; Patton, 2001). There is a range of terminology associated with the work of careers education and development: career teacher, career practitioner, career development practitioner, career advisor, career counsellor, guidance counsellor (See Appendix B). It is often unclear if these are different jobs or if the titles are used interchangeably, depending on nationality or corporate governance (Douglas, 2010). Douglas (2010) further asserts that professionalism in the career development field cannot be achieved while its members and clients do not have an established vocabulary.

1.3. Context of study

To understand the work of rural pathways advisors, it is helpful to have an understanding of the context of their work. In this section, I present some of the key issues influencing their roles. These include the restructuring of rural communities, trends in the future of work, and the need for career exploration.

1.3.1. Situating modern rural Australia.

In recent decades, rural communities have been faced with challenges in an increasingly modernised, globalised world. The challenges often centre on the notion of being left behind where "modernism has tended to position the rural on the negative defining side of a binary, which associates the future, sophistication and advancement with the cosmopolitan-urban" (Roberts, 2016, p. 29). McManus et al. (2012) highlight that images of decline in rural Australia, while dangerous and damaging, are not entirely inaccurate. The two fundamental challenges to rural communities in Australia, and internationally, are significant shifts in economics and demographics (Cheshire, 2006; Corbett, 2007; Cuervo, 2016; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; McManus et al., 2012; Roberts, 2016). It is important to note that, despite these trends, not all rural areas

are in decline – for example areas of "rural gentrification" (McManus et al., 2012, p. 20) that include communities boosted by tourism or close enough to urban centres for people to commute. However, the towns in this study can be considered "deep rural… [that] seem to lack sufficient symbolic resources" (Lowe & Ward, 2009, p. 1324) to make them appealing for tourism and are not geographically suited for commuting to larger centres.

Some of the biggest changes in rural economies are the effects of modernisation on the agriculture industry and local populations. In Australia, the agriculture sector has steadily decreased in terms of its contribution to the gross domestic product with estimates that up to 50% of farmers will leave the industry by 2021 due to consolidation of farms, globalisation of the marketplace, deregulation, and climate change (Gill, 2011). The amalgamation of agricultural industries and the effects of a globalised agri-business sector are resulting in a shift in many rural Australian communities to service, education, and health industries (Cuervo, 2016). This requires a re-thinking of potential career pathways and an increased focus in different skillsets. It has also resulted in declining populations. Like much of rural Australia, the region under consideration in this research has seen a continued decline in population (ABS, 2019). The effects of these changes on rural communities and their youth' aspirations and pathways exploration is detailed in the next chapter.

1.3.1.1. Rural education policy.

The changes to rural communities have also resulted in changes to the discourse and policies of rural education. In the past forty-five years alone, State and Federal government inquiries have found rural Australian students to be disadvantaged through measures of lower academic results, high rates of teacher turnover, and lower student retention rates (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Halsey, 2018; HREOC, 2000). Brett (2007) contends, and Cuervo (2016) agrees, that rural issues are often pushed to the periphery of policy. Green and Letts (2007) consider Australian education policy to be geographically blind, not sensitive to the various influences of space and place. When the Federal government does address rural education issues, the recommendations are often abandoned and promises for better support are not kept (Cuervo, 2016). This can be seen in the response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC) report *Emerging Themes: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* in 2000. A *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* was formed in 2001 by the Ministerial Council on

Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to address the longstanding inequalities. However, the initiative was disbanded, having had little impact. Australia is potentially repeating this process right now. In 2018, the Federal government released its findings from the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (IRRRRE) (Halsey, 2018). The recommendations included renewed calls for: a national focus on rural education in order to improve access, outcomes, and opportunities; better resourcing to support improved outcomes; better access to ICT; and a focus on the transitions into and out of school. The IRRRRE also recommended that a taskforce or commissioner be established to spearhead the responses. The effectiveness of such a taskforce and the extent to which the actionable changes are made is yet to be seen.

In light of the changing conditions in rural communities, a number of Australian studies focusing on ensuring quality rural education have been conducted such as: the *NSW Rural (Teacher) Education Project (R(T)EP)* (Green, 2008 {Ed}); *TERRAnova: Renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia* (Reid et al., 2012); and *Bush Tracks* (Graham & Miller, 2015). Of particular relevance to this study, Cuervo's body of work – notably *Young People Making it Work: Continuity and Change in Rural Places* (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012) and *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education* (Cuervo, 2016) – explores how rural educators and youth understand and respond to these changing conditions. The resulting tensions in young people's decision-making between staying or leaving their rural community are presented in more detail in Chapter Two, including both Australian and international considerations.

1.3.2. Future of work.

The world of work is swiftly changing in the 21st century and seems likely to continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Changes include the way people access and think about work, as well as the types of work available. This requires a potential rethinking of the role of pathways advisors.

1.3.2.1. New ways of approaching work.

The rapidly changing nature of work is not solely a rural issue. It is increasingly important to ensure all young people have access to careers education, as well as careers guidance (CICA, 2011; MCEECDYA, 2010; OECD, 2002; OECD, 2012; Parliament of Victoria

Economic Education Jobs and Skills Committee, 2018). One of the main reasons for this is the increased likelihood of ongoing transfers between careers throughout a person's working life. Career development is "the term that best describes this complex process of managing life, learning and work over the lifespan" (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 9). Students need to be prepared to manage their career portfolio; at the very least, they need to be prepared to expect to have more than one career in their lifetime (McCrindle, 2019). No longer are people expected to leave school and work at one job until retirement. Today, on average, people are likely to have up to 17 employers across their working life (McCrindle, 2019). This flexibility is the new "norm" and the increasing levels of job mobility requires careers education to prepare students for Hall's (1996) concept of protean careers that "involves horizontal growth, expanding one's range of competencies and ways of connecting to work and other people" (p. 35). There is also evidence of a growing percentage of people in non-standard work consisting of part-time, temporary and self-employment, especially women and young people (OECD, 2015a). Preparing students for this sort of workforce includes preparing them for lifetime employability rather than lifetime employment, and assisting them to develop an openness to lifelong learning (Patton, 2001).

1.3.2.2. Changing types of work.

The types of work on offer have "been profoundly transformed by the interplay of globalisation, technological change and regulatory reforms" (OECD, 2015a). The globalisation of the economy provides a double-edged sword of increased opportunities as well as increased volatility (OECD, 2015b; OECD, 2015c). There are more types of jobs on offer than ever before, students today are likely to work in jobs that have not yet been created (OECD, 2013; OECD, 2015b). The Digital Age requires more technology-related jobs and evolves at a pace never before seen in human history (OECD, 2015b; OECD, 2015c; OECD, 2016b). This level of change and adaptation in industry requires workers to change and adapt their expectations and skills, or risk being left behind. The globalised, digital economy also changes how and where different types of work can be done through phenomena such as outsourcing and off-shoring. For example, many manufacturing jobs are either outsourced to countries with cheaper operating costs or the workers are replaced by computerised machines. The substitution of human labour to machines may lead to a short-term job loss, but in the long-term creates job growth in directly related jobs, such as machine maintenance, or indirect jobs, with new markets opening up

(OECD, 2016a). All of this creates a working environment that places a premium on skills that machines and Artificial Intelligence (AI) cannot replicate like interpersonal skills and problem solving (OECD, 2016a).

1.3.3. Careers education and social justice.

In light of the changing nature of work and changing economic conditions, access to appropriate careers education has become part of the social justice agenda. It is increasingly important that young people have access to careers education and guidance (Irving & Malik, 2012; Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee (PVEEJSC), 2018). One of careers education's aims, particularly in government schools, is to prepare students to be productive economic and social members of the ever-evolving workforce (Irving, 2010). However, the political nature of careers education, developed through a government-backed curriculum or framework, results in the careers educator needing to respond to systemic injustices by acting to either reinforce or reduce inequality (Irving & Malik, 2012). These government-backed careers education frameworks tend to push curriculum focused on creating productive citizens for the neoliberal economy and socio-cultural status quo, despite that status quo being established on an uneven playing field (Irving, 2012; Law, 2012). For example, they may reinforce the concept that the prosperous and modern jobs are urban-based while the undesirable jobs are more likely to be in rural areas (Cuervo, 2014). It is unsatisfactory that a person's life chances are still so dependent on their social origins (Polesel, 2009) despite the claims in documents such as Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) and the IRRRRE (2018) to minimise this inequality.

In moving toward a more socially just society, the roles of the careers educators and their work are crucial. Education systems determine which knowledge is most valuable, leading to which skills and qualifications are most valued (Malik & Aguado, 2012). This is potentially a source of great influence, especially when Victorian schools have a high level of autonomy when it comes to developing careers education programs (OECD, 2002). Douglas (2012) stresses the need for a careers educator to know their client and their context in order to provide the most appropriate guidance. Her Critical Framework places the activity of careers education in the centre of the particular context and the macro environment of politics and economics. The framework highlights the interconnectedness of policy, context, and career advising. This echoes the philosophy underpinning Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space (see Section

2.2.1.) that calls for the educator to understand their place to achieve the best results for themselves and their students. Irving (2012) argues that while careers education needs to be contextualised for the lived realities of the participants, programs also need to be developed with an educational philosophy that reflects on the current injustices. His critical-recognitive social justice theory encourages questioning the agenda behind careers education frameworks and for careers educators to take on a more active role in advocating for social change.

1.3.4. Victorian careers education.

In 2017, the same year that the data for this thesis was gathered, the Victorian Parliament called for an inquiry into school career development which included a mandate to consider the needs of regional students. This was done in part because they attributed high rates of tertiary attrition and youth unemployment as indicators that students' career development needs were not being met (PVEEJSC, 2018). Their key findings were: career development is not meeting students' needs; it is an "essential school function" (p. xvi) requiring a whole school approach; school practitioners need more support, resources, and to be qualified; students need more workplace exposure and VET needs better promotion; disadvantaged students need tailored services; and there are more challenges in regional areas.

Prior to the Inquiry, there were a number of initiatives and resources available for pathways advisors. They were often supported or endorsed by the Victorian Department of Education (DET[6]), the CEAV, and its parent organisation the CICA. It is not known how effective these resources have been (PVEEJSC, 2018). The OECD conducted a review of Australia's career guidance policies in 2002, albeit 15 years and four state mandated curricula ago (VCAA, n.d.). While the review praised the amount of attention paid to careers education, it criticised the ad-hoc nature of its delivery. In 2010, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs developed the Australian Blueprint for Career Development which "is a framework that can be used to design, implement and evaluate career development programs" (p. 9). This was meant to be the main document to inform curriculum. Also in 2010, the Federal government through the Department of Education, Employment and

[6] In this thesis I have used the acronym DET to signify the Victorian Department of Education, not the Federal Department of Education – unless otherwise noted. This is because when the participants of this research referred to "the Department," they meant the state's DET.

Workplace Relations (DEEWR) published *ReCap: A Resource for Career Practitioners* as "a national career resource that supports the demanding role of school-based career practitioners by providing easy access to materials and up-to-date information about current policies, national and state/territory career and transition programs, and career information resources" (p. 2). These resources were followed by the "Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework" by the Federal Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education and the Federal Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations which "describes *a set of non-technical skills, knowledge and understandings that underpin successful participation in work*" (emphasis in original, p. 1) and is meant to be used in conjunction with the Blueprint. In 2012, the DEECD produced the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework, an online resource that is "a scaffold for a career education program for all young people from Year 7 to Year 12 and for young learners with VET providers and in the Learn Local adult community education sector" (DEECD, 2012, p. 1). While there are a number of documents to assist schools and careers educators to develop a careers curriculum, the extent to which these are used varies. In Atelier Learning Solutions' review of the Blueprint in 2012, they found that awareness was not widespread since there was no follow-up after its rollout in 2008 (p. 2). One of the main reasons for the poor usage is identified as a lack of explicit policy.

It appears that careers education is underrepresented in the Victorian Curriculum which was to be fully implemented by schools in 2017 – and the senior school certificates. This is important to note because, while there are a number of resources for schools and teachers that outline how and what to teach in careers education, none of them are mandatory; teaching and assessing to the Victorian Curriculum is mandatory. In the Humanities – Economic and Business Learning Area, there is a strand called Work and Work Futures that:

> focuses on the nature of work, the work environment and the contribution of work to individual and collective wellbeing. It explores the factors that influence the work environment now and into the future and the rights and responsibilities of participants in the work environment. (VCAA, 2015)

This is the only explicit mention of careers education in the F-10 curriculum, although many of the key competencies from the Blueprint can be identified by sifting through the Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Capabilities, Personal and Social Capabilities learning areas of the Victorian Curriculum. However, it is up to each individual school as to the content and time devoted to careers education. Additionally, each VCE study design – the curriculum document

for each subject – contains a section that outlines the employability skills students should acquire throughout the study, which are based on the Employability Skills Framework from 2002. VCAL has a much stronger and more explicit focus on employment skills, including strands called Work Studies and another titled Personal Development Skills. Senior students also have access to VET where they participate in industry-specific learning and skill acquisition. Notably, offering and participating in a work experience program is not mandatory. When schools do run work experience, it is typically for one to two weeks for students between Years 9-11 (PVEEJSC, 2018).

The DET provides public schools with funding to provide career development to students in Years 10-12 called the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs). This funding is intended to be used to create individual student career action plans (CAPs), pathways advising, and reaching out to students six months from leaving school. Submitting CAPs for students aged 15 and older is a requirement to secure funding, which is based on student numbers and the school's Student Family Occupation (SFO[7]) density. It is up to the schools to decide how best to use their funding so long as it is used in-line with its intentions. MIPs funding allocation and requirements changed slightly after the recommendations of the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry, but are not the part of the context of the participants' narratives in this research and so not included here.

1.4. Rationale for study

Given the ad-hoc and potentially insufficient pathways explorations programs in Victorian public schools, as well as the additional challenges facing rural youth and schools, it is timely to consider the work of rural pathways advisors. Despite the recognised need and value of careers education (Douglas, 2010; Irving, 2010; OECD, 2015a), very little is known about careers education in Victorian rural schools and less is known about the advisors (PVEEJSC, 2018). The policy and curriculum documents tell part of the story and require interpretation by each advisor. It is important to form an understanding of how rurality influences the work of pathways advisors since they are designing the programs. With the growing number of priorities being forced into schools, and Learning Areas fighting for space on the timetable, finding time

[7] SFO- calculated using parent occupation data and is used as an indication of student socioeconomic status

for meaningful pathways exploration programs may be dependent on the pathways advisors' knowledge and skills. Developing a clearer understanding of how the local context influences the programs is a way to understand the on the ground reality of what is being provided to students.

The OECD's Review (2002) identified the autonomy of Victorian schools in regard to careers curriculum as both a benefit and a potential problem. Particularly important in rural schools, there is the possibility to develop programs that are highly tailored to suit the local community. However, there is also the possibility of unregulated programs causing harm if the pathways advisor is ill-equipped for the role. Frequently, teachers in rural schools are required to teach outside of their expertise (Handal et al., 2013; Lamb, Glover & Walstab, 2014) and schools may experience a higher level of staff turnover (Downes & Roberts, 2018). With the local, and global, workforce of the community likely to be changing dramatically (OECD, 2015a; OECD, 2016), the need for high quality pathways exploration programs is vital. I believe it is a matter of social justice – rural youth are important and so are their teachers.

Considering the rapidly changing nature of work, policies and curriculum directions as suggestions rather than mandates, the limited options to qualifying as a careers practitioner, and the likely exacerbation of these issues in rural communities, further research is required to understand the work of rural pathways advisors, to ensure that rural Victorian students are provided with the appropriate tools to succeed. Ensuring rural students, and their teachers, have the adequate resources to explore viable pathways and be able to prepare themselves for the future, requires more attention to the social injustices that may be facing them. In this thesis, I explore how the local context influences the work of rural pathways advisors – educators tasked with developing relevant, engaging, and practical programs to assist students in their transition from school to tertiary study and/or work.

1.5. Research Questions

In order to gain an understanding of the work of pathways advisors in rural schools, I posed the following question:

How is the experience of being a pathways advisor shaped by their rurality?

This question is supported by two, more specific questions:

How is pathways advisor's work related to their rural social space?

How is pathways advisor's work influenced by issues of social justice?

Combined, the research questions aim to recognise that each rural community, school, and educator are located in unique contexts which will in turn have an influence on their work.

1.6. Thesis Structure

This chapter serves as the introduction where I described my own experience of being a rural pathways advisor and how it led to this research. I also provided operationalised definitions of key terms in my study before laying out the context in which it takes place including the need to consider rural communities and the changing nature of the world of work. Then I explained the significance and aims with a focus on the importance of focusing on rural education and the role of pathways advisors. Finally, I stated my research questions.

In Chapter Two, I present key relevant issues for education in rural contexts. This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first is a review of the literature addressing rural education focusing on the challenges for schools and educators, student aspirations, and youth outmigration. The second part details the conceptual framework, the theories that underpin it, and my application of these ideas. The conceptual framework stems from Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space and Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic sense of social justice for rural education.

Chapter Three details my methodological considerations. This consists of my methodological approach, research design, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. It explains the need to consider the rural in conducting education research and my use of narrative inquiry. This also provides the first introduction to the six participants in this study.

Chapters Four through Nine are the findings and discussion in relation to the literature and conceptual frames. Each participant has their own chapter which is structured in two parts – the findings which are written to reflect the co-constructed nature of the narratives, followed by a separate discussion section. In the discussion section, I present my interpretation of their stories based on the conceptual framework.

Finally, Chapter Ten contains my overall conclusions with recommendations for practice and policy, the limitations of this study, and areas for future research. Following Chapter Ten are the Reference List and Appendices.

1.7. Summary

Throughout this chapter I have described the context of my research in terms of the challenges facing rural Australian communities, key trends in the world of work, and careers education policy in Victorian schools. I identified the need for this study since little is known about how the particular contexts – its rural social space and issues of social justice – of each community influence the nature of the role of pathways advisor. The chapter concluded with the main questions driving this research and the outline of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Education in Rural Contexts

In this chapter I explore the literature that is relevant to the context, challenges, and opportunities facing rural pathways advisors. Part One reviews the literature on education and pathways in rural areas. This includes a discussion of the challenges facing rural schools and educators, student aspirations, and challenges facing rural communities. Part Two presents the conceptual framework. It is an examination of the theories underpinning the conceptual framework used to create and analyse the participant narratives. It explores the development and application of Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space, and Cuervo's (2016) call for a more pluralistic understanding of social justice in rural education.

2.1. Part One: Rural Education and Student Aspirations

A review of the literature revealed that there are areas of concern in rural schools that have the potential to affect the work of pathways advisors. The literature shows that these areas include persistent challenges to teacher recruitment and retention as well as obstacles to accessing adequate professional learning. There is also a demonstrated need for careers education that is better suited to reality of rural economies as schools – pathways advisors in particular – have the potential to influence student aspirations. The literature concerning student aspirations revealed it to be a complex, contested topic. It entails issues of what it means to be 'successful' in rural and/or urban contexts and considerations of whether or not a university or other tertiary qualification is necessary. Finally, in the literature about the Stay or Leave paradox of rural education, several key influences were shown to frame students' future prospects by the schools, local industry, and the community.

2.1.1. Rural school challenges.

Understanding the educational context of rural schools is crucial to understanding the experiences of being a pathways advisor as they are influencers of student aspirations and potential career pathways (Hooley, Watts, & Andrews, 2005). Based on their research in the UK, Hooley, Watts, and Andrews argue that "teachers should be at the heart of a long-term

approach to enhancing career and employability learning, especially as schools now have the primary responsibility for the delivery of career and employability learning for young people" (p. i.). The wider literature on rural teachers suggest that the chief challenges include the ability to provide a broad curriculum, recruiting and retaining staff, and challenges in regularly accessing relevant professional learning.

The challenges and opportunities facing rural schools affect the work and conditions facing pathways advisors and so their students' potential career options (Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams, Jago, 2017). While each school experiences these challenges and opportunities differently, they remain trends across much of rural Australia. Examining the influence of rural teachers on the tensions between their students' aspirations and sense of belonging is an under-developed area in the existing literature (Cuervo, Corbett & White, 2019). This is despite teachers' "critical role shaping the futures of students and rural communities. Teachers' work matters because they reconcile top-down education policy agendas with the complexities youth bring into school" (Cuervo et al., 2019, p. 92).

2.1.1.1. Persistent challenges facing rural Australian schools.

Rural schools face many challenges that may not affect their urban counterparts to the same extent. While rural schools create engaging learning communities, many suffer from fewer resources and an uneven playing field (Halsey, 2018; HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2014). This uneven playing field relates not just to levels of funding and support, but from an underappreciation of rural needs by policy makers. Halsey (20018) highlighted that "more has to be done to recognise the diversity of contexts, challenges and opportunities of leading and teaching in RRR [regional, rural, remote] schools and communities" (p. 6). Through this, his report tied the lack of adequate funding, and support for rural schools to the continuation of poorer results for rural students. In essence, the uneven playing field in rural Australian contexts is based on the obstacles facing them due to their geographic location. For example, if a teacher wishes to attend a professional learning activity outside of their school, it is likely they will have to travel significant distances, requiring an additional use of resources such as time and money.

There are several results of this uneven playing field. It can lead to a narrower curriculum with fewer specialist teachers (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995), teachers being required to teach outside their areas of expertise (Handal et al., 2013) with less access to professional

development, less support for students with special needs, the need for composite classes (Lamb et al., 2014), and high staff turnover rates (Lyons, 2009). Irvin et al. (2011) found that school characteristics were predictive of high-poverty students' educational achievements and had the power to potentially restrain or promote those achievements, underlining the importance of schools to rural students and their career aspirations. This is not only a problem in the traditional pathway to tertiary studies, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), but also in catering to students interested in preparing for vocations through the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and Vocational Education Training in Schools (VETiS- henceforth VET) programs (Polesel & Clarke, 2011).

One persistent challenge that faces rural schools is their difficulty in attracting and retaining staff (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Karmel, 1973; Lock et al., 2009; Roberts, 2014; Sharplin, 2009). Downes and Roberts (2018) in their review of the literature about the "intractable dilemma of rural school staffing" (p. 46) in Australian contexts, identified that despite extensive academic attention to the issue, rural school staffing remains a problem. The persistence of the 'intractable dilemma' is such that in Biddle and Azano's (2016) review of the literature in the American context, they used it as a way to track the changes and consistencies over time of the "rural school problem" (p. 298). The key themes underlying this problem centre on the "professional and personal challenges that relate to the geographical isolation and small size of the communities these schools service, and the specificities of rural context" (p. 45). They found that rural schools remain hard to staff. This can make it even more difficult to sustain engaging, broad programs that can expose and prepare students for a breadth of career options. Despite a number of intervention and financial incentive strategies to attract staff, retention remains a problem (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Lyons, 2009). While there is some disagreement in the literature about the ubiquity of high turnover (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Reid et al., 2012; Roberts, 2017), the rate of rural teacher transience has both positive and negative possibilities (McConaghy, 2006). Schools may hire someone who is able to expand students' cultural capital and broaden their pathways-related horizons, or they may, through lack of options, be forced into hiring someone who is ill-equipped to be a rural teacher. McConaghy (2006) argues that transience is here to stay as a result of an increased sense of globalisation and that "rather than a problem, or merely a problem for schooling, teacher transience may indeed be necessary for teacher learning and the generation of new pedagogical and leadership knowledge" (p. 54). She agrees with rural sociologists such as Urry (2000) that a characteristic of the new millennium is an increase in the movements of people, so rather than view this phenomenon as

"an abhorrent one" (p. 48), the teaching profession should more closely consider the relationships between place, the nature of teaching, and mobility. This mobility potentially has additional benefits as teachers play an extra important role in rural communities as transmitters of cultural capital (Roberts, 2014). They also aid in nurturing students' "discourse of 'self-reliance', 'choice' and 'individual responsibility' to manage and cope with their transition" (Cuervo, 2014, p. 551) which is crucial for rural students who typically must leave their community to pursue further education.

2.1.1.2. Professional learning.

The challenges associated with engaging in effective professional learning for rural pathways advisors are particularly important given the rate of change in the nature of work, the ever-expanding number of pathways available to students, and the possibility that the advisor has not obtained a relevant qualification. Woodroffe et al. (2017) found that even teachers who are not directly involved with careers education appreciated accessing professional learning about careers and pathways.

The body of literature that directly addresses professional development in rural schools is relatively new and slowly growing, so there are still significant gaps (Glover, et al., 2016; Gallo, 2013). Glover et al. (2016) maintain that upskilling and refreshing the professional knowledge of staff can be problematic in rural areas. They found that accessing relevant professional development in a rural context is challenging, time-consuming and costly, creating issues for the school and individual staff members. Roberts (2017) found that the longer a teacher was in a rural school the more concerned they became about the lack of professional development they could access. A vital aspect to professional learning for rural teachers is its relevance and practicality to their local area (CEP, 2010; Jenkins, Reitano, & Taylor, 2011; Lyons, Cookey, Panizzon, Parnell, & Pegg, 2006). Jenkins et al. (2011) argued that "professional leaning… should promote re-contextualised pedagogies that are sensitive" (p. 80-81) to local areas. Currently, many rural teachers do not feel they have adequate opportunities for professional learning (CEP, 2010; Lyons et al., 2006). In Lyons et al.'s (2006) report on Science, ICT and Mathematics teaching in rural and remote Australia, they found that this applied to both internal and external to the school opportunities. They also found that teachers felt a significant need for more professional learning in order to cater to the needs of their Indigenous, special needs, and gifted students.

Research suggest that rural schools need to find a way to value the time and effort required of staff to attend professional development, which often requires lateral thinking. One such way is through local, collaborative networks. These networks, as described by Lieberman and Miller (1999), are one way to combat the staleness and lack of fresh ideas coming into isolated schools by focussing on collaboration. However, establishing these networks is no easy feat, nor are networks to be seen as a "panacea" (Thomas & Niesz, 2012, p. 683). Networks as a source of professional learning for rural teachers has been a recent focus in academic literature. Lyons et al. (2006) argue that rural educator networks are one way to enhance local knowledge and to lessen professional isolation. The Country Education Partnership's (2010) survey of new teachers identified that local and local cluster professional learning was more valuable than decontextualised opportunities provided by the Victorian Institute of Teaching. This was in part due to the accessibility issues described above but also suggests their usefulness in developing place-based knowledge and ways of tailoring curriculum and policy to suit local needs. In their evaluation of the *Pathways to Success* project, Woodroffe et al. (2017) stressed the importance of building networks, not only between educators, but with a variety of local partners, in order to promote various career pathways for rural students. They found that locally-based professional development "can be effective with regards to increased knowledge, understanding and confidence; and how partnerships with external collaborators such as universities and industry can be created to support this, and that this should occur as an ongoing opportunity" (p. 167).

2.1.2. Careers education and work trends.

Cuervo (2016) argues that careers education and pathways exploration in rural schools needs to provide students with the skills to be prepared for a changing work and economic future. He claims that "the last three decades have witnessed profound and complex changes in rural spaces" (p. 20). Pathways advisors need to be knowledgeable about these changes and how they affect future work trends, both locally and globally. However, Bauch (2001) argues that often "rural youth often are not given the information and skills they need to make an informed choice about where they wish to live and work. Frequently, schools are not responsive to local concerns" (p. 207). With the changing nature of work and restructuring of rural economies, "effective career education is crucial in preparing young rural and regional people for life and work in the increasingly globalised economy of the future" (Woodroffe et al., 2017, p. 159). Tieken (2016) stressed the need for careers advising in rural schools to include 'place' as a vital

aspect (see below), also highlighting the anxiety and dilemmas around career planning as a result of the changing economics:

> Currently, the conversation about rural college-going is largely a conversation about jobs… It is an anxious conversation, a conversation threaded with anxiety about the future, a conversation that… also fills many evenings at home. It is also a difficult conversation, one littered with ethical dilemmas and moral judgments. This conversation is particularly challenging and especially consequential for the poorest of schools and communities. To the extent that it can expand opportunities for students and their families, it is a useful and necessary conversation. (p. 220)

Tieken frames careers education as not only important for the future of individual students, but for their families and wider community as well. While Tieken's study was based in an American context, the same sentiment can be seen in the Australian context.

In addition to new or significantly changing industries, in Australia there is an increase in how people access work across their lifetimes. Workers are taking up the options of part time employment, flexible working hours, and parental leave schemes (McCrindle, 2019; OECD, 2016b). Each of these require changes in attitudes, expectations, and skills from both employers and employees. Youth in particular continue to have a higher willingness to leave one job for another (OECD, 2015c; OECD, 2013), leading to further job instability. One example of the significantly changing rural industries is the agriculture sector. Gill (2011) explored the ways in which farmers and policymakers respond to policies and portion responsibility within the citizen-state relationship. Her argument was based on the deregulation of the dairy industry in New South Wales, the final rural industry to be deregulated, the culmination of a process that "resulted in the rationalisation of farming practices, the globalisation of the marketplace and reduced real prices for agricultural products" (p. 128). This dramatic neoliberal shift in economic conditions is further exacerbated by the worsening impacts of climate change and severe drought. As such, "it is estimated that the number of farmers nationally will decline by between 30% and 50% between 1996 and 2021" (p. 128). The economic upheaval and job-market unpredictability is shaping rural youth' understanding that the stability enjoyed by previous generations is not something they should expect (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). The decline of traditionally stable jobs has also heightened the need for parents to update their understanding of career pathways and planning strategies in order to be prepared for the future their children face (Cuervo, 2016; Tieken, 2016). Many parents, especially those from lower SES

backgrounds, may not be able to access enough information in order to support their child's higher education aspirations, including where to find additional financial other support (Fischer, Barnes, & Kilpatrick, 2017). The economic and employment instability has led to a growing perception that more education is necessary so that they can leave their dying communities for greater opportunities in urban areas (Gabriel, 2002).

2.1.3. Student aspirations.

The literature suggests that rural pathways advisors' work is shaped in part by the aspirations, or lack thereof, of their students. There are a number of issues facing rural students that can affect their pathways options and ability to choose a career pathway that is most interesting and appropriate to them. Understanding and raising rural student aspirations has become a topic of much interest (Corbett, 2016; Cuervo, 2014, 2016; Hawkins, 2017; Tieken, 2016; Zipin et al., 2015). However, *aspiration* is a contested term which can be problematic in rural communities. Zipin et al. (2015) theorise aspirations as

> complex formations, deriving from multiple social-cultural groundings, including ideological and material-historical dimensions of the present and verging future… our theorization carries the view that structural conditions and relations of current times are those of a *darkly troubled historical era* – likely to be prolonged – in which young people in power-marginalized contexts face uncertain and downwardly mobile prospects for livelihoods. (emphasis in the original, p. 241)

Their theorisation argues for the need to consider the key elements of rural social space (see Section 2.2.1) when analysing rural student aspirations – that place, culture, and economies matter and are influential. As Cuervo, Corbett, and White (2019) highlight, "aspiration is often viewed as synonymous with social mobility: to be 'aspirational' is to be 'ambitious' which is conflated with a willingness to leave current circumstances and to look for a better life" (p. 88-89). This notion that aspiration is tied to mobility and so success creates tensions between who stays in the community and who leaves, through the framing of locally available work, community values, and the presentation of various careers to youth by the various adults in their lives (Corbett, 2007). Zipin et al. (2015) additionally point to the negative impacts of oversimplifying or making assumptions about 'successful' aspirations concerning "the symbolic violence that induces low SES students to see themselves as in deficit when not succeeding in

pursuit of [so called] doxic goals is compounded when policy makers make simplistic judgments that these students and their families lack appropriate strategies" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 233). These goals – based on the Bourdieuian sense that *doxic* is that which has become the unquestioned norm in a society – include the expectation that students will undertake tertiary qualifications.

In exploring the aspirations of rural youth, it is necessary to consider the role their teachers and advisors play. There is "evidence of institution-level effects on young people's choices" (Haynes, McCrone, & Wade, 2013, p. 476) and positive relationships have been found between students engaging in career planning and an increase in their engagement with school (Kenny et al., 2006; Plasman, 2018). With much of the discourse around aspirations influenced by urban expectations and norms, rural teachers are placed in such a way as to mediate the tensions arising in their communities (Cuervo et al., 2019). Cuervo et al. argue that this is a powerful position for teachers to be in because "at stake in teachers' discourses, values and practices are the building of futures for young people and for rural communities" (p. 97). Further problematising the development of rural youth aspirations, Cuervo and his colleagues (2019) identified three trends apparent in recent Australian government studies regarding rural student aspirations:

> First, there is a persistent call for economic and community development policy to address the exodus of youth from non-metropolitan communities. Secondly, teachers seem to be critical to promoting the mobile aspirations of rural youth and their communities, but there are questions about how they might promote social inclusion and belonging. Thirdly, the tension between aspirations and belonging and the role teachers play here seems to have been overlooked by policy-makers. (p. 93)

Rural teachers, and pathways advisors, must navigate these tensions and work toward both their local community expectations and priorities as well as meeting wider, global market demands.

Moreover, students may not require university qualifications in order to pursue their chosen career in rural areas or rural labour markets, as identified by Corbett and Bæck (2016) in regards to the Canadian and Scandinavian contexts. Corbett and Forsey (2017) argue that not considering space and local culture when it comes to exploring rural student aspirations leads to "unproductive hand-wringing and victim-blaming" (p. 429). In their study that compared the varied rural contexts of the Pilbara region of Western Australia with Atlantic Canada, they contend that "rural youth are simultaneously encouraged and blamed as they are chided to aspire

higher" (p. 430). Students are trained to believe they need further education to be 'successful' and made to feel guilty for leaving to become 'successful.' Furthermore, Hawkins (2017) puts forth an argument that while student aspirations matter, the ability of students to fulfil their aspirations is just as important. She highlights rural Tasmanian students "may still face challenges in terms of having the economic capital as well as the cultural capacity, navigational capacity and 'hot knowledge' to fulfil these aspirations" (Hawkins, 2017, p. 50). This is particularly challenging for first-in-family students and youth in low socio-economic communities.

2.1.3.1. Factors influencing rural youth aspirations.

There are a number of factors affecting rural youth aspiration, which in turn affects the work of rural pathways advisors as they respond to and further develop these aspirations. In Kilpatrick et al.'s (2018) evaluation of three south-east Australian university rural outreach programs, they stated student aspirations were affected by factors of rurality. These are factors that may be more influential in rural rather than urban areas and include:

- geographic distance and isolation
- financial capacity
- attachment to place and community
- ability to imagine a different vision for the future
- employment opportunities
- exposure to higher education and its benefits
- family history and influence
- overlapping professional and social networks
- navigational capacity, archives of experience
- access to information
- educational cultural capital
- school capacity
- capacity to succeed as an independent learner using online and blended learning. (p. 4- 5)

They concluded from their evaluation that different rural people and communities had different levels of aspirations and expectations. As such, Kilpatrick et al. developed a model that takes into account these variations, suggesting that "disruptions [interventions to raise aspirations] are

appropriate when aspiration toward higher education is limited, and bridges [supports for participation] appropriate when aspiration is higher but expectation of participation is low" (p. 11). They recommend a combination of disruptions and bridges to suit the particular needs of individuals and communities.

Webb et al. (2015) highlighted a vital aspect of developing Australian rural youth aspiration was the need to expose them to careers locally, in other rural places, as well as in non-rural places. Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick (2001) and McIlveen et al. (2012) echo the importance of exposing students to a wide variety of careers. Exposing students to new careers through experiences internal and external to the community is often part of a pathways advisor's role. However, it is important to consider the framing of these possible careers as "a number of factors related specifically to rurality influence rural people's career and higher education aspiration and participation. Like most literature about rural education, these factors reflect a deficit view" (Woodroffe et al., 2017, p. 160). Many of the factors attributed to 'low' aspirations are based on metrocentric norms and expectations; they do not necessarily value the culture of the community.

2.1.3.2. University participation.

Attending university and obtaining a degree has become a widespread expectation as part of a student's transition to work (Cuervo, 2014). The western, globalised culture reinforces the notion that to have a 'good' job, you need to have a tertiary qualification. However, as a social group, rural youth continues to be underrepresented in tertiary enrolments (Fleming & Grace, 2017; Gale et al., 2010) and the changing economic outlook of many communities necessitates new types of career options. As this thesis explores the nature of the work of rural pathways advisors and how they guide students in their decision-making process about attending university, the literature on rural student retention at university is not considered here.

Vernon, Watson, and Taggart (2018) contend that "the contexts and conditions where people live have a profound impact on their expectations to progress to university" (p. 88) and that the likelihood of attending university in Australia declines the further from an urban a student is located. The relatively low percentage of rural students that attend university is attributed to both lower school retention rates and the difficulty of transitioning from Year 12 to tertiary study (Fleming & Grace, 2017; James, 2001). These barriers can be attributed to the

considerable distance and the associated costs of travel and living away from home (Cuervo, 2016; Fleming & Grace, 2017; James, 2001; McIlveen et al., 2012). Students are aware of these barriers (Cuervo, 2016; James, 2001; McIlveen et al., 2012) and some develop ways to overcome them, including high levels of self-reliance and resilience (Cuervo, 2014, 2016). Often these barriers lead to a deferment of their offer (Polesel, 2009). The rural deferral rate is growing, with the highest rate among rural students with a lower socioeconomic status (Polesel, 2009), which is logical given the extra costs associated with attending tertiary study. Most rural students do take up their offers within one year, but a significant portion of those who do not are likely to be unemployed or be in work that is of low status (Polesel, 2009). Alston and Kent (2006) also found that many rural youth postpone their tertiary study in order to qualify for government assistance. They explained that the means-testing required for Youth Allowance adds difficulty for rural youth to qualify; some students try to earn enough money in order to be classified as independent – and so to qualify for Youth Allowance – but there are often few opportunities to do so in small rural communities.

A Western, neoliberal 'paradigm shift' has resulted in a recognition that tertiary studies have become more necessary. Cuervo (2016) identified this international shift beginning in the 1980s in Australia, leading to "an economization of education policy" (p. 49) and a policy shift that held "a neoliberal sensibility of freedom of choice, individual responsibility, personal self-reliance and enterprise" (p. 49) in order to be competitive in a globalised market. The expectations of attending university are particularly difficult for rural students because of the barriers inherent in attending post-secondary education, namely the distance to campus and the additional financial burden (Fleming & Grace, 2017; Polesel, 2009). Rural students in Australia recognise that the skills they would gain through tertiary study are necessary for their futures, just as they also recognise that the playing field is not level; their access to resources is not the same as urban students leading to a problem of equality of opportunity (Cuervo, 2014, 2016; HREOC, 2000). The policy-focus on increasing participation from disadvantaged groups, including rural areas, is also linked to a higher focus on a social justice agenda in order to provide more opportunities (Gale & Tranter, 2011). As explored in the Social Justice section below (2.2.2.), addressing these inequalities is not as simple as a redistribution of funds, but requires a pluralistic approach.

However, much of the research on rural student aspiration, particularly when it comes to university participation, is conducted from a university point of view with an aim to recruit and retain more rural students (see for example Fleming & Grace, 2017). This perspective can

reinforce the attitudes that youth must leave their communities to be 'successful.' While rural students are statistically underrepresented as enrolments, a straight comparison of population and enrolment statistics is overly simplistic and Hawkins (2017) postulates that the discourse about 'raising aspirations' to close the participation gap "may be due to Australian and International HE [higher education] policy which associates low participation with low aspiration" (p. 39). The framing of low enrolment numbers in tertiary education with a lack of aspiration is emblematic of metro-normative expectations, devaluing the various local career paths they may not require further qualifications.

2.1.3.3. VET and TAFE participation.

Historically in Australia, there has been little research focusing on vocational education exclusively in rural locations (Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998). Rural students can face similar obstacles to access Vocation Education and Training in Schools (VET) and Trade and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications (Alston & Kent, 2006) as students wishing to pursue university studies. In addition to these, however, VET students face an additional challenge – the stigmas associated with VET. There is "a view that VET is for 'other' students – not for the traditional users of secondary education" (Polesel & Clarke, 2011, p. 531). They argue that applied and vocational education are not as highly valued in the Australian context and that the focus on academic tracks leads to further marginalisation of students inclined to pursue alternatives. In their 2011 study, Polesel and Clarke found:

> evidence of a status hierarchy of needs which privileges the users of the traditional academic curriculum, rather than those doing VET. This is despite the centrality of work and of the transition to the labour market in the thinking of many young people, and the fact that VET students demonstrate a preference for learning through interactive, co-operative, self-directed and practical pedagogies. This is shown to result in a more negative image of schooling among the VET students, even controlling for their SES background. (p. 534)

This academic hierarchy perpetuates social stratification, as lower SES students tend to enrol in VET in higher numbers (Polesel 2007, 2008; Polesel & Clarke, 2011; Roberts, 2016; Teese & Polesel, 2003). While Teese (2000) located VET subjects toward the bottom of his curriculum hierarchy, Roberts (2016) explored how geography affected the order of the subjects within the

hierarchy and access to subjects, finding that it "*is* spatially organised" (emphasis in the original, p. 262), which prevents rural and remote students from accessing many subjects. Polesel and Clarke (2011) go further, claiming that the Australian senior school certificate structure "privileges university entry and subordinates subject selection to the rules and regulations of eligibility for university selection" (p. 534). This "most extraordinary… acknowledgement" (p. 534) of a curriculum hierarchy in schools has a negative effect on the distribution of funds within schools by creating a culture where university-track subjects "can legitimately subvert not only the allocation of staffing resources but also subvert any allocation of resources based on an objective consideration of the needs of such [working class] students" (p. 534). All of this is especially problematic, and raises significant issues of social justice, in rural schools when many local jobs do not require university qualifications (Alston & Kent, 2006).

In contrast to these negative perceptions, Johns, Kilpatrick, and Loechel (2014) found that VET programs in rural areas are "well positioned to assist in the transition from school to further education and training and careers for a wide range of rural students" (p. 72). In their analysis of survey responses from former students in six different Australian rural school areas – students who had and had not participated in VET studies – they postulated that VET programs are important to rural areas because the students who tended to be interested in VET were also likely to want to live and work rurally. They also concluded that "particularly successful outcomes are linked to school VET courses designed to provide a pathway to local employment, and that include structured work placements" (p. 72). This suggests that education programs designed to meet local needs can have a powerful long-term effect on the community and may have an influence on students deciding whether to stay local or leave for more opportunities.

2.1.4. Stay, leave, or return?

Careers advising in rural areas "must ask not just *What do you want to be?* but also *Who do you want to be? Where do you want to be? Why and how do you want to be?* and, importantly, *How can we support you?*" (emphasis in the original Tieken, 2016, p. 220). Most rural students who wish to pursue tertiary education or have a 'good job' need to leave their communities to do so. While they may not wish to move away, preferring their local life, there can be a dearth of opportunities. As Gabriel (2002) frames it, students do not choose to leave but are pushed. Cuervo (2016) further argues that despite most rural young people wanting to stay in their communities, they are "confront[ed with] an array of discourses and pressures about their

role and needs in their post-school life and a series of structural limitations that make leaving their community not only their 'only' but their 'best option'" (p. 66). This phenomenon of outmigration has been the subject of considerable research nationally and internationally (Carr & Kefelas, 2009; Corbett, 2007, 2010; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Cuervo, 2016; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). It is a multifaceted predicament. In his rural Canadian study, Corbett (2007) stated that students are conditioned through their schools, parents, and community that leaving is required to be 'successful'. In many Australian communities, and from policymakers, there is "insufficient recognition of the validity of aspiring to remain in a rural community and how this sort of aspiration neglects the desire of many students and their families" (Cuervo et al., 2019, p. 90). Corbett (2010) summarises this global phenomenon:

> The problem of youth outmigration and brain drain is juxtaposed in tension with the concern for those children who do not leave, generating a kind of Catch-22 for communities that ironically find themselves celebrating the loss of human resources to cities and large towns. (p. 227)

In his seminal work 'Learning to Leave' (2007), Corbett explored the many tensions involved with the rural stay or leave dilemma. The rural Canadian fishing village serves as an exemplar of the ways these tensions develop and playout across generations. As he considered who stays, who leaves, who leaves and come back, and why, he also reflected on the role of formal education in this decision-making. Some of the main tensions he identified revolved around differing measures of success between the local community and the outside metrocentric education system as well as traditional gendered expectations of aspirations and education participation. For example, he argued that local success is measured by a person's, usually male, ability to manage the family fishing business. To do so does not require the formal education set out by standardised curricula, but rather a capacity to take on intergenerational local knowledge. This community expectation establishes an irony in schooling where "people do not stay in school because they are 'smart,' they do so because they are not considered particularly gifted by community standards" (p. 33). He further argues that women are overrepresented in the 'leavers' cohort because of the patriarchal nature of local work. Finishing school and potentially going to university is more desirable for females because they are either not expected to participate in or are excluded from local work opportunities. To address these tensions, Corbett calls for schooling to embrace and prepare students for all three possibilities through place-

conscious efforts that are "connected to the specific struggles and problems encountered in particular rural locales" (p. 269).

2.1.4.1. Influences on student decision-making to stay, leave, or return.

The amount of influence that schools have on students' decisions to stay, leave, or eventually return to their rural communities is somewhat contested in the existing literature. Petrin et al.'s (2014) mixed method study of American rural students' aspirations and post-school plans found that:

> when we examine specific school, community, and economic predictors… we find little evidence to suggest that schools or educators groom students to leave. Rather, contact with teachers or other school personnel about career or future plans tends, if anything, to be associated with student aspirations to remain in rural communities... in terms of absolute magnitude, and net of the influences of residential factors and family structure… the effects of school factors on plans to leave the community are comparatively slight. (p. 322)

Others argue that schools implicitly and explicitly influence students to leave. Cuervo (2016) considers that the current educational system directs resources to rural schools so that they can assist students out of their communities. Carr and Kefalas (2009) use the term 'Achievers' rather than 'Leavers' and in opposition to 'Stayers.' They also use phrases such as "fate, indeed their duty, to leave" when describing the future of the Achievers. These students are identified by their expected achievement potential – measured by traditional academic benchmarks and likelihood of proceeding to university studies – and are then treated differently both in and out of school. Corbett (2007) also identifies problematic language applied to the Stayers as being "cast as the losers in the education drama; they are the 'dropouts,' the ones who cannot read the 'writing on the wall' and make the 'obvious' choice, which is to acquire an education as means to buy passage elsewhere" (p. 9). Finally, Harmon and Schafft (2009) call on rural schools and communities to take "responsibility and take collaborative actions that build community and strengthen positive results for all students to be successful… regardless of where they ultimately chose to live" (p. 8).

Students' perceptions of the stay/leave predicament are shaped in part by the school's framing of possible career pathways, but also by community expectations and local industry

requirements. These perceptions are developed through interactions with the community, including family, as well as media and cultural signals (Corbett & Bæck, 2016). Pathways advisors can find themselves at the crux of these influences and needing to navigate the various tensions. As such, their understanding and framing of the possibilities has the potential to mediate the 'rural brain drain' or exacerbate it. Tieken (2016) explains the role of guidance counselors in a rural New England state, and other adults in the community, as:

> This perceived opposition suggests that adults might construct—or students might understand—an either/or dimension to postsecondary aspirations: either leave and go to college and prosper economically somewhere far away or stay and retain your connection to family and face a bleak economic future here. With this framing, the both/and options are lost—ways to both continue one's education and maintain ties to home. Also lost is the possibility of helping students find creative ways to leverage more individually oriented educational pursuits, such as college, toward collective benefits—sustainable economic opportunities, strong political leadership, a more promising rural future—back in their rural communities. (p. 220)

With this, she positions the adults as being able to advise and influence youth in ways that are in their best interests but also the best interests of the future of the community. Furthermore, Petrin et al. (2014) have found that to "the extent educators and adult community members do encourage youth outmigration, this does not tend to be done uncritically" (p. 322). They argue it is done with an eye to upskilling young people in order to return to their communities with new knowledge and experiences.

Another, occasionally problematic, influence on students' career aspirations are local industry needs. Student perceptions of local labour markets are one influence on their pathways decision-making (Corbett & Bæck, 2016). As Cuervo et al. (2019) states, this group can be problematic in that the goals of education do not necessarily match up with the expectations of the labour market, nor are the expectations consistent between industries. Cuervo et al. (2019) posits that "this poses a conundrum, particularly for teachers, in the sense that some industry leaders call for a more academic and open-ended aspirational approach while others are more interested in seeing a more immediate vocational focus" (p. 96). Further complicating this and necessitating a solid understanding of the local employment landscape, Petrin et al. (2014) identified economic conditions as "among the strongest predictors of student plans to leave their communities… it is student perceptions of employment opportunities that differentiate Leavers

from Stayers" (p. 322). In Kilpatrick and Loechel (2014)'s investigation of two rural Tasmanian towns, they "demonstrated the importance for communities of developing interactional infrastructure to address the issue of matching skills, needs and training provision" (p. 17). They defined 'interactional infrastructure' as "as opportunities and structures for interaction in a community" (p. 4). Kilpatrick and Loechel contended that interactional infrastructure not only assists with matching training needs with provision, but also serve as a way to manage the broader social, economic, and demographic changes within rural communities. The role that local industries themselves can play in shaping these expectations, particularly when they form partnerships with schools, is explored below.

2.1.4.2. The role of rural communities in education.

It is necessary to consider ways in which rural communities may influence the work of teachers, schools, and the aspirations and work futures of rural youth. This is because the literature has shown that when rural towns and schools work together, they can improve their sustainability through developing a sense that their youth are valued and can have a viable future by staying local. Internationally, Biddle and Mitra (2015) explored how youth-adult partnership programs can positively reposition the traditional relationships between middle grade students and adults in the community. They found that while these partnerships were an important way to increase student voice, there remained structural challenges to enacting change initiatives, especially if they concerned addressing issues of social injustice or silence. With Australian rural communities facing a number of challenges related to changing economics and demographics (Black, Luck, & Race; 2010; Cuervo, 2016), they must work to ensure their sustainability. In many cases, this involves a reconsideration of the role of the school (Green 2015; Roberts & Downes, 2016) and a shift to recognising learning opportunities extend beyond the school-gate. As explored in the previous section, students' perceptions of their communities play a role in their decision-making about staying, leaving, or returning. As Carr and Kefalas (2009) point out, it is possible that "small towns play an unwitting part in their own decline" (p. 24) without a mind to their futures. This includes building a sense of community that convinces youth it would be worthwhile to stay or return. Petrin et al. (2014) found that rural educators and community members felt it was important to develop "local environments that young people felt connected to and valued by, and to which at least some of these youth (or others like them) could ultimately envision returning" (p. 323). In a qualitative study situated in rural America, Biddle,

Mette, and Mercado (2018) explored the challenges and opportunities in building collaborative partnerships between schools, organisations, and communities to better support children facing adversity. They found that while teachers were vital, the "community cohesion" (p. 198) and support of organisations that included a variety of key stakeholders in the community were necessary to be successful. Additionally, Cuervo et al. (2019) consider that "rural teachers have the capacity not only to impart knowledge, build human capital and raise students' aspirations, but also generate social capital and a sense of belonging within the community" (p. 93). One way this can be done is through strengthening the ties between schools, community members, and local industry as a way to help students see the connection with their learning and possible pathways before them. Bauch (2001) argues there is much potential in these partnerships and those communities that recognise this are "well positioned to serve as learning laboratories" (p. 216), bringing deeper relevancy to the curriculum. With these partnerships made clearer to students, they may be able to make more informed choices about staying or leaving.

Developing partnerships with schools – with local industries and tertiary providers where available – is a way to strengthen ties and help students explore a wide variety of pathways options (Bauch, 2001; Marlow & Nass-Fukai, 2000; Woodroffe et al., 2017). However, the existing "literature reveals little insight into *how* [emphasis added] rural and regional schools, universities and communities can partner to engage with this new educational career agenda" (Woodroffe et al., 2017, p. 160). Establishing and developing relationships require teachers to have a strong understanding of their community (Reid et al., 2010) and necessitates community members and teachers work together (Corbett et al., 2017). Woodroffe et al. (2017) suggest that a "multi-sector partnership… [creates] a more authentic, fit-for-the-future collaborative venture" (p. 169) than schools developing student aspirations on their own. Harmon and Schafft (2009) echo this, identifying collaboration as a "hallmark of good public school that can meet the challenges facing rural communities and their students in the 21st Century" (p. 8). They add that the "fundamental assumption that ensuring the academic success of students, on the one hand, and the social and economic vitality of the rural community, on the other, are not mutually exclusive priorities, but are instead deeply and indeed inextricably connected" (p. 8).

In the next part of this chapter, I present the conceptual framework that guided this research. I explore the theories underpinning Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space and Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic sense of social justice, as well as examine some of the key pieces of rural education literature that engage with these models.

2.2. Part Two: Conceptual Framework

In this thesis, I use a conceptual frame of rural social space and a pluralised understanding of social justice to consider the experiences of rural pathways advisors. Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space highlights the uniqueness of each rural community and Cuervo's (2016) call for a wider consideration of social justice in rural schools identified a need for more than just a redistribution of goods but an attention to specific local needs and voices. These models were used in this study because pathways advisors' work is related to: 1) their town's unique economy – future jobs and local employers; 2) the people – the contexts of students and their families; and 3) the geography – local industries and distances to other opportunities. Social justice was considered through the plural lenses of: 1) distributive justice – equality of opportunity; 2) recognitional justice – the importance of understanding rural contexts or pathways advising; and 3) associational justice – the importance of input into working conditions, because how these issues manifest themselves in a specific place affect the future of that place and its people. Both of these models were employed because they are interrelated. Each community has its own unique rural social space which alleviates or exacerbates issues of social justice, and issues of social justice mediate the rural social space. For example, if a town's main employer goes out of business, then it may make it more difficult for unemployed families to access pathways opportunities outside of the community due to the associated costs such as petrol or accommodation.

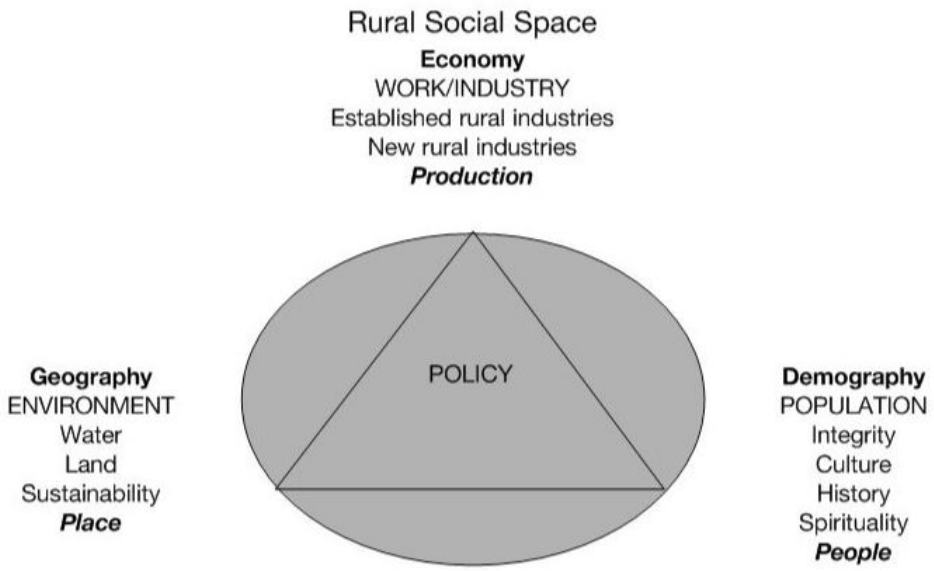
In the following sections, I explore the concepts of the rural social space model and the pluralised social justice frame I have used to shape my research. I include my understanding of the theories that underpin each elemental concept with an explanation of how my project contributes to new knowledge. Finally, I consider how other studies have used these models and how they have influenced my work. A detailed explanation of how I applied the models to my analysis of the data is included in Chapter Three (see section 3.6.2.1.).

2.2.1. Rural social space.

Reid et al. (2010) developed a model of 'rural social space' that conceptualised rural as the interplay of geography, demography and economy (see Figure 2.1). They posit that "rural

social space is the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time" (Reid et al., 2010, p. 269). The rural social space model aims to counter the deficit model of viewing rural as inferior to urban by "highlight[ing] the complexities and even the advantages of rural places" (Reid et al., 2010, p. 268). They note that often policy and funding ignore the local educational issues and expect all schools to achieve similar outcomes. The model was intended to inform policy, teacher preparation courses, and professional education programs because they recognised the importance of teachers to the long-term sustainability of rural communities, especially with schools as integral elements of communities (Reid et al., 2010). Operationalising rural social space can be problematic in that it is a fluid construct and one that is unique to any time, location, or event. However, the authors stress the need for teachers, especially pre-service teachers, to know their rural social space, which is an achievable goal given that it is a shared and practiced social space. When a teacher knows their position within their rural social space, they are better equipped to design relevant programs and deliver them with a pedagogy that suits their students (Reid et al., 2010).

Figure 2.1. Rural Social Space Model



(Reid et al., 2010, p. 266)

The rural social space model was developed by Reid and colleagues as a product of their *TERRAnova* project (2008-2010) as a way to "describe and theorise successful teacher education strategies… that appear to assist in making rural teaching an attractive long-term career option for Australian teachers" (Reid et al., 2010, p. 263). They wanted to develop a framework that pulled together both quantitative measures and abstract conceptualisations in order to more fully understand the rural. The model was informed by Bourdieu's (1999) exploration of the relationship between physical space and social space where "a physical space is defined by the mutual exteriority of its parts, so social space is defined by the mutual exclusion (or distinction) of the positions that constitute it, that is, as a juxtapositional structure of social positions" (p. 124).

I will now briefly explore the theories that the rural social space model utilises and demonstrate the connections they have to my research. These include theories of space and place in education research.

2.2.1.1. Space.

Space is a contested concept whose meaning is dependent on relationships and has political undertones. Massey (2007) puts forth three propositions for understanding *space*: it is the "product of interrelations… the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality… [and is] always under construction" (p. 9). This space as a social construction aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) construction of space as *perceived*, *conceived*, and *lived* which is central to Soja's (1996) trialectic of space as real-and-imagined. If the concept of space is not problematised and is presented as abstract or a-political "it serves to naturalise existing spatial arrangements that favour certain social groups at the expense of others" (Morgan, 2000, p. 278).

It is this politicised and under-considered notion of space that can be damaging to the rural, marginalising it and creating more socially unjust conditions. Roberts and Green (2013) argue that "existing notions of social justice don't recognize space or place" (p. 772) in Australian education which results in the rural being "deficit in relational to a cosmopolitan expectation" (p. 772). So, in combining the rural social space model and its consideration of rural space as complex and meaningful with Cuervo's (2016) multifaceted social justice for rural

education, my research aims to recognise the unique space of my participants and how *their* space affects *their* work.

2.2.1.2. Place.

Place as Gieryn (2000) describes it, "is space filled up by people, practices, objects and representations" (p. 465). So, *space* is the larger concept while *place* is associated more with a specific locality. Taking place to be the more specific concept compliments Thomson's (2000) *thisness* that asserts every school and community are unique. "Places have something to say" (Grunewald, 2013, p. 624) and Green and Reid (2014) note that place is becoming a focal point for rural research. The focus on place in this thesis is to highlight the necessity for pathways advisors to understand it in order to be effective in their roles. Their work is based, in part, on the specific place they work in; they need to know the place in order to provide appropriate advice to the youth residing there. In many ways, their work is the epitome of place-based or place-conscious education.

As such, this research seeks to add to the growing body of place-based education in rural research. Corbett (2007) stressed the need for place-based education to be "connected to the specific struggles and problems encountered in particular rural locales" (p. 269) and so to serve as resistance to the pervasive rural in decline and deficit discourses. Pathways advisors should consider the specifics of their locale –the economic outlook, the types of jobs that are and will be available, and the needs of local people. By knowing their place, they may be in a position to, as Gruenewald (2003) suggests, pushback on the increasingly place-less turn of modern education towards standardised testing and uniform outcomes. Pathways advisors should recognise that there is not a uniform transition out of school and into work, for example, not all students want or need to go to university. Gruenewald argued "that consciousness of place fundamentally challenges assumptions and conventions associated with schooling, specifically, assumptions about the purposes of education reform, the possibilities for democracy, and the meaning of accountability and achievement" (p. 621). This knowing and subsequent challenging of the assumptions is a way to increase the recognitional and association justice for rural places.

Cuervo (2016) drew connections between place-based education and ensuring the sustainability of rural communities. He also made clear connections between place-based education and improved social justice for rural education. Much of this may fall under the purview of pathways advisors, particularly since they are likely to have multiple connections in

the community and are in a position to influence the Stay or Leave dilemma facing rural youth (see Section 2.4.1.) Cuervo (2016) summarised place-based education as an approach that "aims to interrupt this exogenous force that promotes an outward look of the present and future by building strong relations between youth and their local community through curriculum and pedagogy that focuses on young people's local experiences" (p. 200). Cuervo also highlighted that a critical aspect of place-based learning is that it is "a successful way of engaging and motivating socially marginalized students or so-called students at-risk, through a politics of recognition and association that includes and values their contribution to the school and community" (p. 200). It is in a community's interest to value the contributions of the Stayers and not to simply act as "talent export industries" (Cuervo, 2016. p. 201). My research builds on this understanding by exploring how pathways advisors utilise their knowledge of place and its influence on their work.

2.2.1.3. Applications of the rural social space model in education research.

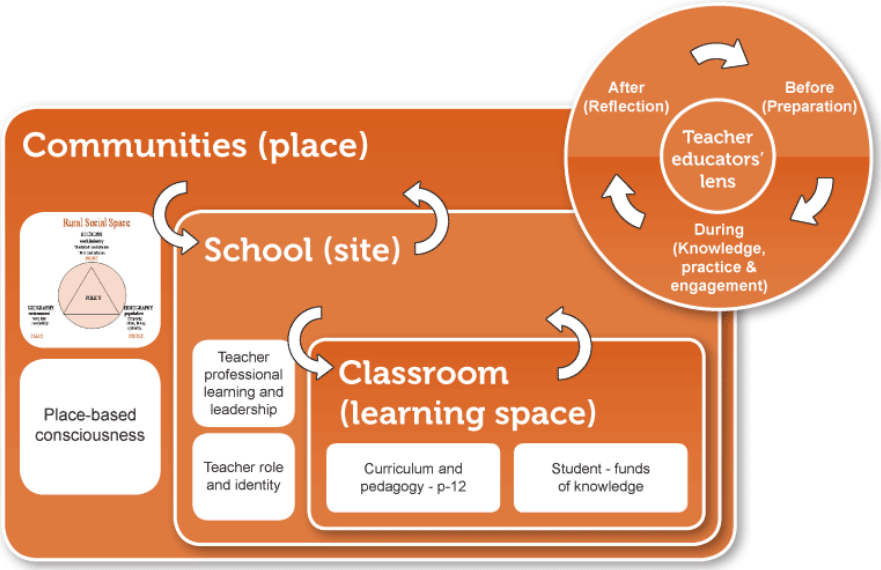
Since its inception in 2010, the rural social space model has been used in several ways. The most prevalent use is as a way to define and recognise *rural* as complex and varying rather than the opposite of urban. For example, Corbett & Vibert (2013) in their exploration of the intersections of rurality, literacy, and social justice in rural Canada used the concept of rural social space in their analysis to show the need to understand 'rural' in education research as moving toward a "more complex postproductivist understandings of the multilayered nature of life places that are transforming rapidly and incessantly" (p. 258). Some of the key previous uses are explored below.

A frequent use of the model is in the literature about teacher education and how teachers fit into their communities. The model was developed to improve teacher education with the aim of better preparing students to be 'rural ready.' In their mixed methods research on the transitions of preservice teachers to rural schools in Victoria and Queensland, Australia, Kline and Walker-Gibbs (2015) stressed the need for preservice teachers to be community ready. This includes being prepared for multiple aspects of rural teaching such the relationship between school demographics and communities and begin able to recognise the difference between locations. They used the model to highlight the complexities of rural spaces. Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke, and Kline (2015) also used the rural social space model to inform their Pedagogy of the Rural which "draws together rural education theory and practice as influenced by dominant

cultural ideas about isolation, distance and size, and what it means to be a teacher in a rural context" (p. 81). In their re-consideration of rural education practice, they argue for a more complex understanding of the 'rural' and a focus on what the rural brings to education rather than what the teacher brings to the rural context.

The complex conceptualisation of the rural through the rural social space model was also influential in the Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) project – a teacher education resource package designed to support teacher educators as they prepare preservice teachers for rural contexts. The RRRTEC project was developed alongside the TERRAnova project, the foundation of the rural social space model. White and Kline (2012) explain that both projects were based on literature on Australian rural teacher education published 1990-2010, a longitudinal survey of preservice teachers that undertook a rural practicum, and a series of in-depth interviews of teacher educators in different states and territories. RRRTEC resources are organised and underpinned by the conceptualisation of rural social space (see Figure 2.2). These resources are sorted into five modules: experiencing rurality, community readiness, whole school focus, student learning and the classroom, and preparing for a rural career (White et al., 2011). These modules reflect the concept of rural social space – however, the model is not used as an analytical tool.

Figure 2.2. RRRTEC model



(White et al., 2011, The RRRTEC conceptual framework)

Another significant example of the application of the rural social space model can be seen in White et al.'s (2011) exploration the relationship between preservice teacher programs and the recruiting and retaining of quality teachers to rural Australian schools. They argue that understanding rural social space and developing policies for rural education that reflect the requisite nuance are vital to the sustainability of rural communities and teacher attraction/retainment. They used the three main dimensions of the model to explore how rural communities with successful schools invested in their people, economy, and place. The application of the model here is most like my own use, in that they pulled deconstructed the model and considered their data collected through the TERRAnova project through each dimension. However, they presented their findings thematically, drawing on examples from their many data sets to discuss each dimension of the model while I bore into each individual's work based on each dimension. So, most of my analysis is based on individual participant examples with a holistic consideration in my conclusions. This difference is key in that White et al. (2011) sought to explore successful schools across the Australian context, while my focus is on how individual rural contexts shape the work of individual pathways advisors.

The rural social space model has been used as a theoretical lens in rural education research, namely by Reid. In 2017, she argued for the use of rural social space as a way to consider the *wicked problem* of locational disadvantage and to develop effective ways to address it. Reid (2017) applied it to a case of one disadvantaged rural Australian community to demonstrate how the problem manifests and what sorts of responses are necessary for change. By doing so, she highlighted the need for considerations of improving social justice for rural education to extend beyond the school and to the community. Her use of the model as a theoretical lens demonstrated the complexities of social space in rural locations and that 'solutions' that address only part of the wicked problem are not only insufficient, but may cause harm. This use differs from my own in that, while I also try to illuminate the complex nature of each rural social space, I try to do so by exploring each of the model's dimensions distinctly.

Finally, there have been a number of calls by prominent voices in the international and Australian rural education research literature to ensure that the complexities of rural be considered through conceptualisations such as the rural social space model. In 2014, Corbett argued for the need to re-evaluate place and space in Canadian rural education through an increased focus on spatial thinking and the influence of geography on education outcomes. Then in 2015, he suggested several ways in which rural education research around the world can be improved through a greater focus on sociology, such as the need to move past imagining

"rurality as a rather stagnant, static space" (p. 19). Also in 2015, Roberts and Cuervo considered future trends in rural Australian education research. They called for the continuation of recent examples of research (see Green & Corbett, 2013; Reid et al. 2010; White & Corbett, 2014) that "begin to engage with contemporary social theory and entwine education, rurality and the social condition to develop insights into each" (p. 2). This requires that rural education research be approached with an understanding that rural social spaces are complex, dynamic, and unique.

My research here aims to respond to these calls through a use of rural social space as a conceptualisation of rural (see Section 1.2.1.1.) and as an analytical tool. This is the significant difference between previous utilisations of the model and my own. I have applied it explicitly as an analytical framework, not just as a concept underpinning my conceptualisation of rural. In this way, I am building on the previous uses and extending it through use as an analytic tool. My focus was on the three main elements – demography, geography, and economy – and how pathways advising intersects with each. A more detailed description of how I have used the rural social space model as an analytical tool can be found in Section 3.6.2.1.

2.2.2. Social justice.

The other aspect of my conceptual framework is the pluralistic conceptualisation of social justice put forth by Cuervo (2016). He argued that in order for there to be an increase in social justice for rural education, there needs to be a more complex understanding of social justice. Cuervo called for a continuation of the policy-focus on distributive justice, but to improve there needs to be more recognitional justice and associational justice. In other words, we need to increase our understanding of marginalised groups and this can be accomplished through their increased participation in the process.

In this section, I begin by explaining the need to define social justice followed by my understandings of the concepts of distributive justice, recognitional justice, and association justice as shaped by Cuervo (2016). The literature regarding social justice in education is vast and varied, but for the purpose of this research, I have chosen to utilise Cuervo's (2016) conceptualisation and so focus my discussion on his work and the theorists that influenced his work. I conclude this section with an examination of key examples of research using a pluralistic understanding of social justice in rural education and outline how I have used it as a lens for this study.

2.2.2.1. Defining social justice.

The term social justice is often ill-defined or the author assumes a shared understanding of the highly contested term (Cuervo, 2016). Most definitions involve, to varying degrees, concepts of equality and fairness with a meritocratic concept of success. There is also a movement towards a broader, yet more nuanced understanding. Cuervo (2016) argues for a contextualised definition that is not "an abstraction but [sits] within specific contexts of interpretation and enactment" (p. 82), in other words, an understanding of social justice that sits within a specific rural social space. He further stresses that social justice is not a 'thing' "to be handed down to passive recipients" (p. 94) but should be a relational, contextualised process. The term should be understood by the person applying it, the person reading it, and the people benefiting from it. When everyone has their own fluid view of what social justice is, it can be problematic to establish a consistent understanding. This thesis utilises Cuervo's (2016) expanded conceptualisation of social justice as one which considers not only distributive justice, but also recognitional and associational justices as it applies to rural education. Generally, in this research, distributive justice focuses on access to resources and appropriate funds as well as concerns about equality of opportunities. Recognitional justice focuses on understanding the nuance and individuality of various groups and communities of people. Associational justice focuses on the ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes involving a person's work and life.

2.2.2.2. The need for a pluralistic understanding of social justice in rural education.

Exploring the concept of social justice as it relates to rural education is an important step in combating the deficit model where rural areas are depicted as less desirable than urban areas. This plays out in what Green and Letts (2007) see as the geographical blindness in Australian education policy. Important reports such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) and most recently the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) (2018) call for every child to have access to just and equitable education opportunities. The lack of consideration for the impacts of place creates opportunities for a relatively straightforward, yet incomplete, distributive approach to social justice. Additional resources are distributed to the 'disadvantaged' rural, placing a higher value on "the

cosmopolitan values of the urban elites" (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 765) and utilises an economic definition of equity. These distributive policies ignore the uniqueness of each community's rural social space and thus the distinct needs of the communities and schools. Reid (2017) argues that an understanding of rural social space is necessary to address the social justice agenda in rural schools because it "means acknowledging that we always live in a more than social world: that we live in places that have geographies *and* histories, and these matter" (emphasis in the original, p. 94). The *wicked problem* of social injustice in rural areas requires equally complex and long-term solutions.

As such, Cuervo (2016) argues that rural education would benefit from a more pluralistic understanding of social justice with increased focus on *recognitional justice*, which aims to minimise cultural domination of marginalised groups, and *associational justice* that accounts for participation in decision making by the affected groups, rather than simply on *distributive justice* that calls for a redistribution of goods in a more equitable way. His understanding is built primarily on the work of Iris Marion Young, but a pluralistic view of social justice is also explored by Fraser (1995) and Gewirtz (2006). In regards to rural education in particular, Cuervo is supported by Roberts and Green (2013), who additionally call for the consideration of place when researching rural education.

2.2.2.3. Distributive justice and Australian rural education policy.

Rawls (1971) argues "the justice of a social scheme depends essentially on how fundamental rights and duties are assigned and on the economic opportunities and social conditions in the various sectors of society" (p. 7). Policies that embrace an economic form of distributive justice can be seen as a way to lessen the structural disadvantage often experienced by rural schools. While Young (1990) argues distributive justice can improve issues of access, simply re-distributing resources, which may of themselves not be sufficient, does not address the inherit unfairness and inequality of opportunity. Unfortunately, as Cuervo (2016) points out, distributive justice has been the approach to issues of social justice for the past four decades and the terms have been used interchangeably. Moving resources around does not solve the systemic problems underpinning the inequality. Roberts (2016) and Cuervo (2016) note that this has been the primary underpinning philosophy of Australian education-based programs such as the Country Areas Program (CAP) and the original Gonski Review of 2011. This redistribution of resources is steeped in the concepts of equality and equality of opportunity.

In Australia, equality is associated with the value of *fair go* where everyone is entitled to a 'fair' chance of success. Cuervo (2016) contends that equality is often used as a proxy for social justice since people tend to understand it. He further expands that this concept is particularly important when considering rural education because the push for equality drives many of the education policies, making schools "critical actors" (p. 88) to improve or reinforce social inequalities. While there are many factors that can contribute to the disadvantages that students face, such as race, class, gender, geographic location, they should not affect the student's ability to access education (MCEETYA, 2008). Addressing such issues in a rural school, especially when equity is tied to 'sameness' and further, a 'sameness' of resources, is problematic. Gale and Densmore (2000) refer to this as a Market-Individualistic view that is based on the notion that all individuals have the same needs so equality is sameness within the market. This deficit model oversimplifies the particular needs of the individual and each distinct community. It calls for a level playing field through resources when there are entrenched conditions whose causes are not addressed. Some of these conditions in rural schools include the potential quality and turnover of teachers and school leadership, limits to the types of curricular and careers-related opportunities available, and limited access to specialist resources (Cuervo, 2016).

A key component of distributive justice is the concept of equality of opportunity. Cuervo (2016) highlights how this has been at the centre and is a significant goal of recent political policies, including the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) Emerging Themes, National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (2000). It can also be seen in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) (Halsey, 2018). Equality of opportunity aims to ensure everyone, regardless of other factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, have access to the same opportunities to succeed in life. This concept frequently arises in relation to student pathways and careers education (Irving, 2012). While it seems like a noble goal to strive for equal access to resources and a more level playing field – particularly in competitive situations like the job market or Year 12 exams – Young (1990) and Richards (1997) both argue that this is just another way to focus on the redistribution of goods rather than addressing the underlying causes of the injustice. Richards (1997) further postulates how problematic the term is when not everyone agrees on what the standards are for equality and/or opportunity. This disagreement about whose standards are used plays directly back into the deficit model of rurality (Roberts & Green, 2013) where urban standards are used as the benchmarks.

2.2.2.4. Issues of recognitional justice in rural Australian schools.

A significant critique of distributive justice is that it perpetuates the social and institutional structures that systematically oppress under-represented groups (Cuervo, 2016). While these structures are left unquestioned and their unjust practices continue, there cannot be a meaningful move toward social justice. A redistribution of resources does not ameliorate the "neglected social issues" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 92). Instead, Cuervo contends there needs to be an increased recognition and reaffirmation of the various social groups that make up society, including the traditionally underrepresented groups. Young (1990) and Cuervo (2016) see promoting social justice through social groups, rather than individuals, as a more likely way to affect change in the dominating structures since "the causes of many inequalities of resources or opportunities among individuals lie in social institutions, their rules and relations, and the decisions others make within them that affect the lives of individuals compared" (Young, 2001, p. 8). However, this approach also requires caution, especially if recognition of marginalised groups are presented as less-than rather than an equal. This seems particularly damaging, especially to traditionally underrepresented groups, considering the increasing fragmentation of society and increased insecurity around work futures (West, 2012).

Addressing recognitional justice issues in rural education can begin by viewing rural in a way that preserves the distinctiveness of each community and is not seen as being inherently in deficit to the urban. There have been many calls to recognise the multiplicity of rural communities and respect the unique identity and needs of each (Green & Letts, 2007; Reid et al., 2010; Roberts, 2014; Roberts & Green 2013; Thomson, 2000; White & Corbett, 2014). Moving toward a more socially just understanding of rural includes setting aside stereotypes of the rural 'problem' (Reid et al., 2010) and of the rural idyll (Cuervo, 2016) as neither value the uniqueness of communities and create damaging stereotypes. Importantly, in addressing models where the rural is seen in deficit to urban norms, the goal is not to establish a 'sameness' but to embrace and value the differences (Cuervo, 2016). The need to reflect on the differences and various perspectives from social groups should play out in the decision-making process at the system and school level. These recognitions can influence powerful elements of education such as curriculum content and determining whose knowledge is valued (Roberts & Green, 2013).

2.2.2.5. Meaningful participation and improving associational justice.

Associational justice concerns the inclusion of citizens' voices and participation in decision-making where they are stakeholders. Gerwirtz (2006) frames it as an extension of recognitional justice – not only are marginalised groups represented, they have genuine input into decisions that affect their lives. Cuervo (2016) calls for greater opportunities to participate in policy decisions which means allowing multiple voices to be heard and respected. Roberts (2014) argues for the importance of marginalised voices, and in rural education policy, those are often the voices that speak in opposition to the urban as 'normal' or the rural as a homogenised singularity. While including a wider variety of voices in the conversation, it is important for each voice to keep their own identity and values, even if conflict arises (Cuervo, 2016).

It is not enough just to have a variety of voices. They need to be heard and be allowed to participate in meaningful ways. Fraser (2007) warns of the "serious injustice" (p. 22) of *misframing*. She argues that *misframing* is a deeper form of misrepresentation, where the marginalised are grouped with the majority "effectively exclud[ing] the latter from the universe of those entitled to consideration within the community in matters of distribution, recognition, and ordinary-political representation" (p. 22). The participation aspect of associational justice is rooted in democratic principles and should result in influencing distribution and recognition since these affect living conditions (Cuervo, 2016). For rural education, this is seen in curriculum development and in whose knowledge is valued. Roberts and Green (2013) argue that there continues to be a metrocentric approach to curriculum in Australia through its "geographical blindness" (p. 765). This can lead to students struggling to see the relevance of schooling that devalues their experiences (Roberts, 2014) and what post-schooling options they are exposed to/ prepared for (Cuervo, 2016).

2.2.2.6. Application of pluralistic social justice in Australian rural education research.

There have been a number of rural education studies that consider the social justice agenda for and in rural education, both nationally and internationally. However, Cuervo's (2016) theorisation of a pluralistic social justice is relatively new and has not been used as an analytic framework in other research. Cuervo has been a key voice in social justice in rural Australia and has called for an enlarged social justice agenda beginning in 2012. This call has been responded to by several studies central to this thesis namely, Cuervo's growing body of

work, Roberts and Green's (2013) consideration of socially just rural education research, and Roberts' (2016) PhD thesis.

Cuervo's theorisation of a plural framework of social justice in rural Australian education grew from a study conducted between 2006-2010. In this research, he builds on the work of Iris Marion Young with the intent "to reclaim the discourse of social justice from the liberal dominance of the principle of distributive justice" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 3). He collected data from two rural Victorian schools in different contexts through interviews, focus-groups, and document gathering. Participants included students, teachers, school leadership, and parents. His aim was to better "understand the meaning of social justice for rural school participants" (p. 5). To summarise his findings succinctly, he found that much of their focus was on distributive justice but that greater recognitional and associational justice were required to improve the inequalities experienced by participants. Many of his key findings are touched on in Chapters Four-Nine of this thesis as they relate to my own findings. The main development of Cuervo's framework was laid out in *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education* (2016), but other publications have focused on more specific aspects such as forms of justice present in teacher narratives (2012), student perceptions of social justice (2014), and teacher practices that enact social justice (2018). In the analysis of his initial study, Cuervo (2016) used a combination of *a priori* codes and developed emergent themes from his data in order to illuminate the nature and understanding of issues of social justice in the participating towns. This is somewhat different to my own analysis method where I searched for examples of distributive, recognitional, and associational justice then explored how these issues influenced the work of my participants.

Another paper influential to this research was written by Roberts and Green (2013) where they applied the need for a pluralistic framework of social justice in rural education to methodological considerations. This article was not based on new research, but focused on ethical research methodology in rural education and was in response to Cuervo's (2012) call for a wider social justice agenda. While agreeing with Cuervo's trialectic framework, they argued for the need to consider a spatial aspect to social justice as well. This was because the existing agenda was "founded on a view of equity that does not take into account the particularity of rural places or rural meanings and, instead, conceives of rural schools and communities as having broadly the same needs as metropolitan schools" (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 766-767). They stated a belief that in order to improve the knowledge gained from rural education research, the concept of rural social space was necessary to ensure there was a spatial understanding of both the rural and of the social justice agenda. Roberts and Green (2013) did not apply Cuervo's

(2016) model to a particular study, but rather proposed how adding a spatial aspect could improve future research. This argument was instrumental in linking the concepts of rural social space and a pluralistic framework of social justice in my own research. My considerations about respecting rurality in my research are detailed in Section 3.3.2.

A final example of recent Australian rural education research that builds on Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic framework is Roberts' PhD (2016) study. In his project, Roberts argues that in addition to Cuervo's (2016) framework of distributive, recognitional, and associational justice, there needs to be a consideration of curricular-spatial justice in rural education research. Curricular-spatial justice "recognizes that rural educational achievement, or (dis)advantage, is spatially produced and includes the lack of recognition of a form of rural knowledge in the traditional curriculum" (p. 109). Roberts' (2016) study focused on exploring the entrenched disadvantage associated with rural schools underperforming in New South Wales, Australia through a mixed methods approach from a rural standpoint. He concluded that the (dis)advantage was a result of spatial and social considerations. His use of Cuervo's (2016) framework was supplemented by other theories of equity concerning curricular justice and spatial justice. Roberts (2016) used these lenses to re-visit publicly available data on rural education outcomes and previously released reports in order to gain greater insight into the *wicked problems* plaguing rural schools in New South Wales. This is similar to my own approach to data analysis in that I started with the elements of social justice I was curious about when approaching my data. However, rather than revisiting works, I explored the lived experiences of my participants.

To summarise my approach to using Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic framework, I applied it as an analytical lens when reading rural pathways advisors' narratives. I looked for examples of distributive justice, recognitional justice, and associational justice in their stories and then dug into each dimension for each participant. This was similar to how I applied the rural social space model – piece by piece for each participant. For more details about how I did this, see Section 3.6.2.1. and for more details about how I ultimately came to understand the relationship between the models, see Section 10.1.

2.3. Summary

Rural pathways advisors have a multitude of challenges to navigate – they must be able to balance the needs and priorities of their students with the needs and priorities of their communities. The tensions created by the growing expectations of tertiary qualifications and the inequality of opportunity pose additional challenges for rural pathways advisors. These include ensuring students are exposed to a wide variety of career options both locally and elsewhere, and helping to provide enough information so that students and their families can make informed decisions about the future. Their responses to these challenges shapes their role and their approach to pathways advising. The nature of these challenges and the 'appropriate' strategies to address them vary between each community and each advisor. This is further explored in the Participant Chapters and expanded on in the Conclusion. They are explored through my conceptual framework of Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space and Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic social justice agenda that calls for not only improved distributive justice, but also recognitional and associational justice for rural schools. By utilising these frameworks, I have been able to develop a greater understanding of how a particular rural place influences the issues of social justice it experiences as well as how it shapes the work of pathways advisors. In the next chapter, I describe my methodological choices, participant recruitment, and a detailed description of the application of my conceptual framework.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I present my methodological choices and considerations for this research, including my philosophical approach and epistemology. I begin by restating my research questions and explaining why my approach and methods are best suited for the data I collected. I then discuss the ethical considerations I faced, introduce my participants and detail their recruitment, and conclude with my data collection and analysis techniques.

3.2. Methodological Approach and Research Questions

As I explained in Chapter One, my interest in rural pathways advising stemmed from my own experiences in the role and frustrations with its vagary and distorted external perceptions. One of my driving principles for this project is that rural education and rural education research needs to respect and celebrate the uniqueness of each place, rather than view it as a homogenous less-than of the urban. I consider educators as one of the keys to helping students achieve to their highest potential. Pathway advisors are instrumental in students transitioning out of the classroom and into the world beyond the school gates. Therefore, a focus on rural pathways advisors - their practice and experience- is one element in exploring how to best support and encourage rural students, beyond just academic results. In this thesis, pathways advisors' voices about their experiences are central as they are best positioned to describe their work. It is important that they be heard and understood in their own terms.

The epistemological position I bring to this research is that of social constructionism. Crotty (1998) considers constructionism to be how knowledge is created as humans interact with the world and "that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 9). I consider knowledge to be subjective and that understanding, in a research context, is fashioned by the researcher, the participants, and their interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Knowledge is created within a sociocultural context (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) and is "shaped by our lived experiences" (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, p. 104). It is necessary to consider the "specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of their participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Therefore, it is

important to be clear about how my interpretation of the data has been shaped by my experiences and positioning in relation to the research (Creswell, 2013), and to explore the influence each participant's context has had on them.

The main research question was:

How is the experience of being a pathways advisor shaped by their rurality?

This question invited an exploration into the various tasks, roles, and interpretations of pathways-related work in schools from the perspectives of the people in that position. From there, further questions arose regarding the various influences that shaped these roles.

How is their work related to their rural social space?

How is their work influenced by issues of social justice?

The participants' experiences, views, and shaping of their roles were developed in part by the uniqueness of each community. Participants' stories revealed a range of issues relating to distributive, recognitional, and associational justice (see Chapter Two).

I took a qualitative approach to my research, as I was interested in collecting rich, detailed data that allowed the participants' perspectives to be heard and explored (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research, in part, by the inclusion of participant voices and the need to be "sensitive to the people and places under study" (p. 44). The importance of participants having a voice in their own research cannot be underestimated (Burke, 1998; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Finger & Verlaan, 1995; Ivanitz, 1999; van der Meulen, 2011), especially in rural research (Hamm, 2014; Roberts, 2014). Hamm (2014) summarised the value of continued participant involvement throughout the research process as such:

> By asking members of a community to participate in research, and validate or expand on their own interpretations, you are inviting them to engage in a process that is complex and messy. This 'process as outcome' approach to research reflects what it means to be part of a dynamic rural community." (p. 101)

The process of continual input provided multiple access points for participants to ensure their voices and perspectives are properly represented. Bryman (2012) also contends that qualitative methods allow for an emphasis on context and "we cannot understand the behaviour of members of a social group other than in terms of the specific environment in which they operate" (p. 401). This was key to shaping my research question and I highlighted the *thisness* (Thomson, 2000) of

each school and educator through the lens of Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space (see Chapter Two). Given the multifaceted nature of teachers' work, the increasing complexity of pathways and the world of work, and issues of social justice, I wanted to take a holistic account of their roles by exploring the "relationships… [and] complex interactions of factors in any situation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 47).

3.3. Research Design

In this section, the design of the research is presented. First, I outline my position as the researcher and the implications this has for the research design. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological and ethical considerations of conducting rural education research and of conducting a narrative inquiry. Finally, I describe how I recruited the participants, and how I collected and analysed their narratives.

3.3.1. Positioning of the researcher.

The relationship of the qualitative researcher to the population under study is important to identify, as the researcher's own background can have a significant impact on how the data is interpreted (Breen, 2007). In this, I was both an outsider and an insider to the topic of rural Victorian pathways advising. My sense of being something of an outsider to rural Victorian education, having been raised and educated in rural Massachusetts, USA, allowed me to view issues from a different perspective. However, my experiences in pathways advising in a rural Victorian school positioned me as an insider and gave me insight into the work of other pathways advisors in a similar context. I had been a careers educator for four years and a pathways coordinator for two in the same region as the participants in this study. However, I stepped down from both roles early in the study for practical reasons, as well as concerns over potential ethical issues arising from recruiting my peers. I did not belong to the Career Education Association of Victoria (CEAV) nor did I hold a position of power within the careers practitioners' network during the research period. While I was still a member of the Network and in the earliest stages of my PhD, I took care not to give many details of my study to my fellow members due to the possibility of inviting them at a later date to participate in my

research. I did not want them to feel coerced. However, they were aware of my general topics of interest, which prompted several of them to offer to participate.

My firsthand experience has shaped my perspective on the research and assisted in ensuring I present the key issues raised and frame them respectfully from an insider's understanding. Similar to Hamm (2014), I have found that some of the most rewarding learning has come from the paradox of considering my own beliefs while I try to understand others'. Understanding, and attempting to bracket off, my own biases and assumptions, is a fundamental responsibility of the qualitative researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), so the positioning of myself on the insider-outsider continuum as described by Breen (2007), is also necessary: a researcher is considered an insider if she sees herself as belonging to the group she is studying and, conversely, an outsider if she is investigating a group to which she does not belong. There are pitfalls associated with each identity: insiders may make too many assumptions and have trouble gathering objective data while outsiders may struggle to identify key themes or encounter issues gaining access (Breen, 2007). Positioning myself in Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) *space between* then allowed me to benefit from the strengths of each, while minimising the limitations (Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hamm, 2014). Throughout this chapter, I note instances and challenges of my insider/outsider status that arose and had the potential to affect my research.

3.3.2. Considerations when conducting research in and for rural education.

Doing 'good' rural research respects *rural* as more than an adjective. It is research that is "*in* and *for* rural communities" (emphasis in the original, White & Corbett, 2014, p. 1). As such, in designing my research, I took care to approach it from a rural standpoint where "rural people and communities *really* matter" (emphasis in the original, Roberts, 2014, p. 136). One way I have accounted for this is through the use of narrative inquiry where the main sources of data are narratives re-storied by myself and member checked by participants. In this research, I explore concepts that are affecting rural communities from the perspectives of rural people themselves. Rural education research should endeavour to combat the deficit discourse surrounding rural areas and rural education (White & Corbett, 2014). As a researcher and as a rural educator, I have seen the tremendous disservice that a metrocentric view, and proposed 'solutions' to rural challenges, can do. Research that oversimplifies what it means to be rural ignores the important considerations of things like distance from services, population density and cultural diversity

(Thomson, 2000). It also places higher value on the urban priorities rather than the perceived 'backward and outdated' priorities of rural communities (Reid et al., 2010). In this research, I explored how rural pathways advisors approached their work and dealt with the realities of their context, from a position of some mutual understanding as a person who performed a similar role in a similar context. Therefore, it was not an attempt to measure participants' perceptions against urban norms and goals around pathways and teacher work, but rather to highlight the complexities and nuances they encountered in their particular context – how their unique rural place shaped their work.

3.3.2.1. Ethical considerations in rural research.

In addition to abiding by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the standard ethical principles set out by the likes of Bryman (2012) and Creswell (2003, 2009), rural researchers have extra responsibilities to their participants (see White & Corbett, 2014; Downes, Fuqua, Guenther, Marsh, & Reid, in press; Gristy, 2014). With rural research often exploring marginalised groups, extra care is needed to avoid causing more damage or further "otherising" (Gristy, 2014, p. 111) of participants. Two of the main ethical considerations I faced in my research centred on the power-relations in defining and recognising each 'place' and the challenges of managing anonymity and confidentiality when researching in small communities.

3.3.2.1.1. Whose definition of place?

One of the ethical issues I was confronted with was deciding how to describe each community in which the participants work. While my aim was to highlight the participants' experiences and understandings of their place, this was often absent from their narratives because they knew me to be a 'local' to the region. However, I did not feel my tangential knowledge of their towns was sufficient, nor is it reflective of each participant's perceptions. Respecting and presenting the uniqueness of each group as seen by participants can also be seen as an important element of recognitional justice (Cuervo, 2016). There is power in defining one's place and too often in rural literature, rural places are described from an outsider's perspective (see Chapter One). For example, the participants describe Westfield as the regional centre and consider the surrounding schools as rural, but the Australian Standard Geographical

Classification (ASGC) Remoteness Areas' formal classification labels the entire area as Outer Regional with no distinction between the larger or smaller towns. So, the publicly available data created a statistical snapshot of each community, but not what it was like to *live* in each community. Therefore, I was conscious of the ethical risks of presenting an incomplete understanding. In order for rural research to be "*in*, *for* and *with* the profession" (Roberts, 2014, p. 141), researchers cannot simply "parachute" (Breen, 2007, p. 170) into a community with the hopes of unearthing deeply meaningful conclusions that will be relevant to the population. However, my research questions focused on the pathways advisor's perceptions of their community. What right did I have to compare their perceptions, some as life-long members of their community, against whatever conclusions I would draw through this relatively brief period of data collection? Visiting each participant provided me with another snapshot impression of the school and community, but not enough to make fully developed or informed opinions. Additionally, I have had some experience with each of the communities over the decade I lived and worked in the region. Ultimately for the purpose of this research, my understanding of each community and its unique rural social space was not as important as the participant's sense of it. My aim has been to present participant perspectives and to value their understandings, so their sense of their community is included in more detail in their individual chapters.

3.3.2.1.2. Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

Managing confidentiality and anonymity by responsibly de-identifying participants presented some of the more ethically challenging elements of this research. Confidentiality is an important right for the participant but can also be problematic for rural researchers (Gristy, 2014). Brann-Barrett (2014) identifies concerns over confidentiality as a reason why people may not participate in research or why they give veiled answers if they do participate. I was very, and repeatedly, clear on what will be possible or not possible to be kept confidential (Brann-Barrett, 2014; Lanas & Rautio, 2014). Occasionally, participants hesitated before giving detailed responses, so we went through the de-identifying process and discussed how confidentiality would be maintained.

During data collection, I encountered several other challenges related to confidentiality. Several participants were concerned that the Department of Education and Training (DET) would be able to identify their schools and there would be retribution for harsh criticism. Additionally, two participants were from the same school, but worked in different programs.

This required extra care to avoid letting them know the other was participating, particularly when each suggested I talk to the other. During a chance encounter with a Network member who had not participated, I learned that at the December 2017 meeting, my research was discussed, and participants voluntarily put their hands up to indicate their involvement. This meeting was held after all interviews were completed.

Anonymity proved to be particularly problematic in this research. As Lanas and Rautio (2014) point out, when there is only one school in the area, it is hard to fully mask its identity. Participants discussed things that were not just unique to their community but to the state, and my inclusion of this information in the research created avenues to easily unmask most participants. However, completely anonymising participants and their communities would diminish the scope of their work and "'[wash] out the specifics of geography, environment, history and social relations that produce the particular form of rural social space that forms the actual objects of our inquiry" (Green & Reid, 2014, p. 34). In this thesis, pseudonyms have been used, but any future publications will require more consideration, masking, and further contact with the participants to ensure their continued consent and comfort with the level of anonymity.

Since all of the participants were part of the same pathways advisors' Network, I decided to de-identify the region as well as the individual participants and the schools. Each interview was de-identified individually, but any commonalities, such as the regional town's name, remained consistent. To do this, I created a master key to ensure consistency across the narratives. While this common set of pseudonyms will help to clarify the participants and relationships, there is the potential for widespread identification of participants if one of them is unmasked. The management of this risk centres on my involvement and on the careers expo since it is a unique event that has influence beyond the local, de-identified region.

I encountered an unexpected issue in relation to my considerations of anonymity. Although I seemed more concerned about anonymity than the participants, most said they were happy for their names to be used when I explained the de-identifying process and the rationale. Even participants who hesitated and asked for clarification about confidentiality in our conversations, either dismissed their worry about it or only wanted a specific topic protected. Wells (2011) and Josselson (2007) both pointed out that participants may not want complete anonymity because they are proud of their work or want to help raise awareness about the issues they face. Since both of my ethics approvals required anonymity, I used pseudonyms in my

thesis, which the participants agreed to, but this will be something to revisit for future publications.

3.3.3. Considerations for when conducting narrative inquiry research.

I chose to conduct a narrative inquiry for a number of reasons, the simplest of which is that I like stories. I have always been an avid reader and enjoyed diving into the worlds of my favourite characters, both fictional and historical. When it came to designing my PhD research, focussing on people's stories made the most sense to me. Narrative inquiry also aligned with my social constructionist view that knowledge is subjective to people's individual experiences in the world. So, listening to people tell their stories seemed an appropriate way to begin to understand their perceptions of their place and work.

While I was keen on the method, Riessman's (2008) caution to researchers new to the discipline occasionally rang true for me. She noted that the variety and flexibility of this method, with its lack of prescriptive rules, can be daunting. I endeavoured to do more than just 'tell stories' about teacher practice by inquiring about the practices revealed within the stories (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). The steps I took to avoid such pitfalls are explained throughout this chapter. They include:

- a clear justification for the study,
- identifying the phenomenon,
- deliberate thought in the planning and description of methods undertaken,
- details of the analysis and interpretation process,
- the position of the study within the wider academic literature,
- communicating a sense of what can and cannot be known about the phenomenon,
- explicit ethical concerns especially around relationships,
- and a mindfulness that the resulting text remain true to the inquiry and are not just stories told to be interesting. (Clandinin et al., 2007)

Narrative inquiry developed from some of the academic disciplines with which I was most familiar and in which I was particularly interested. Stemming from various humanities and social fields, narrative inquiry has been growing in recent decades as a research design

across the social sciences (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011). This has led to a wide variety of approaches to narrative research, depending on the discipline in which it is used and the orientation of the researcher (Creswell, 2006). As Chase (2005) highlights, because narrative inquiry has grown out of several traditions, it can borrow from each of these to create a rich, and potentially participant-empowering method. Finally, the "three commonplaces of narrative inquiry- temporality, sociality, and place- which specify dimensions of an inquiry space" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479), and which need to be considered holistically, is an appropriate way in which to explore the elements of pathways advising, rural social space, and issues of social justice.

I was also drawn to narrative inquiry because it prioritises the participant and, as Creswell (2006) highlights, encourages active participation and collaboration between researchers and participants. I took a sociological approach, underpinned by the beliefs that narratives are co-constructed through the dialogue of the interviewer and interviewee and that they are a social expression of how we want ourselves to be perceived by others (Beuthin, 2014). Riessman (2008) suggests that the rise of narrative inquiry is tied to the modern fascination of self. She contends that in times of the "cult of 'the self'" (p. 7) where people are constantly developing and redeveloping various identities, personal stories are abundant and play a significant role. Connelly and Clandinin (1994) assert that narratives are a "powerful way to imagine who we are, where we've been, and where we are going" (p. 149).

Using narrative inquiry, I was able to tap into the "way people make sense of their lives" (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 631) through the stories of their lived experiences. By asking the participants about their experiences of being a pathways advisor, we were both able to gain a greater insight into their work. Exploring the concept of *experience* was another motivation for using a narrative approach. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) consider *experience* to be narrative in nature so "educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19). They base their understanding of *experience* on the Deweyian principle that experience is personal, social, and continuous. People need to be understood as individuals, but there is a social element to the construction of this understanding. *Experience* has a continuity; it does not happen in isolation but rather builds on previous experiences and leads to future experiences. Exploring how a pathways advisor makes sense of their experiences, was therefore, appropriately explored through narrative inquiry. This approach enabled my participants to choose which experiences they deemed to be important and to frame the stories about them.

While there are many ways to generate stories (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008), I conducted narrative interviews that were unstructured and conversational in nature. Riessman (2008) states that "the goal of narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements" (p. 23). Narrative interviews can take a structured, semi-structured, unstructured approach, or a combination, so long as they "provide an opportunity to prioritise the story teller's perspective rather than imposing a more specific agenda" (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 631-632). As such, I took an unstructured approach to the interviews to allow for greater flexibility and give more control of topics to the participants. Interviews began, as narrative interviews should, with an open-ended prompt, then participants guided the conversation and I asked follow-up questions as they arose naturally (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Wells, 2011). These conversations resulted in collections of short, personal stories about being a rural pathways advisor, the narrative phenomena under consideration. Conduct of these interviews is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

3.3.3.1. Trustworthiness in narrative research.

Krefting (1991) argues that truth value, concerning the confidence in the findings and context of the study, is "perhaps the most important criterion for the assessment of qualitative research" (p. 216). While narrative inquiry is suitable in many ways to explore my research questions, there are several challenges associated with this method of inquiry, namely issues of validity. There are varying scholarly opinions as to how to assess the validity of narrative inquiry, Wells (2011) argues that validity be considered under a framework of *trustworthiness*.

Riessman (2008), who also approaches the "validity problem" (p. 184) through the consideration of trustworthiness, argues that concerns about validity exist on two levels - the story being told by the participant and the story being told by the researcher. Along with Chase's (2005) warning about the impacts of the "interview society" (p. 670) potentially clouding the authentic self from being expressed in participant narratives, considerations must be made about the 'truths' in participant narratives. However, since this research is grounded in social constructionism, the 'truths' of the events, feelings, or other reported happenings, are not the main concern. Participants perceive their context and work differently. My aim was to highlight the various perspectives, not fact-check the minutiae.

Further, I discussed with the participants during our conversations and through our later emails that the analysis would be my interpretation of their stories. This is a dilemma in narrative inquiry since I cannot fully understand all of what my participants meant, nor can they fully understand all of what I mean in the texts about them nor can either of us fully anticipate how future readers will understand the published text (Josselson, 2007). We all bring our own sets of assumptions, biases, prior experiences, and worldviews to our reading of the stories. This is a core ethical consideration since "every narrative contains multiple truths" (Josselson, 2007, p. 551).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the story I am telling in this thesis - the outcome of the analysis of the interview data - I kept detailed records of my methodological practices and critical reflections throughout all phases of the research journey. I have also included extended extracts from the re-storied narratives in the presentation of my findings, as suggested by Bryman (2012). This provided evidence to support my interpretation of the data because the reader can then draw conclusions for themselves. My honesty and reflexivity as a narrative researcher is key to the trustworthiness of the study (Josselson, 2007). As part of my transparency and trustworthiness as a faithful witness (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007), I wrote the participant chapters as a reflection of the member checked re-storied narratives. The findings sections of these chapters include many and substantial quotes from participants. I discuss this structure later in this chapter. Throughout the analysis process, I followed Riessman's (2008) advice and documented, in a reflective journal, considerations of the coherence of the stories, the ability of the stories to persuade an audience, and how to best present the stories in an appropriate form. The working out of these considerations was also reflected in numerous drafts and trials of various forms of text before settling on the final structure. I have included an example of the re-storied narratives in Appendix L.

3.3.3.2. Ethical considerations in narrative research.

Josselson (2007) warns that in narrative inquiry "an ethical attitude requires that we consider the dilemmas and contingencies rampant in this work. We can never be smug about our ethics since the ice is always thin" (p. 560). For me, many of the core ethical considerations of narrative inquiry were similar to the considerations for ethical rural research as discussed above. There must be consideration of the ownership and presentation of the stories; the relationships between researcher and participants; withholding judgement of participants, and the significant

issues around confidentiality and anonymity (see Josselson, 2007; Wells, 2011; White & Corbett, 2014).

Narrative inquiry aims to generate "'data' from a deeply human, genuine, empathetic, and respectful relationship to the participant about significant and meaningful aspects of the participant's life" (Josselson, 2007, p. 539). It requires care from the researcher to ensure a positive and appropriate relationship is established and maintained with the participant throughout the research process, creating "some of the murkiest and most subtle of ethical matters" (Josselson, 2007, p. 545). I had professional relationships with the participants prior to our conversations, so there was already an element of trust between us. Beyond wanting to do right by them through the production of their stories in my research, I felt an additional pressure to represent them accurately since there was a chance I would continue to interact with them. During our conversations, there were moments when we paused to clarify issues of confidentiality and anonymity. There were additional concerns when working with Sarah and her stories – she was my replacement, a friend, and the participant with which I was most likely to continue having a social relationship. The benefits and dilemmas presented by this intimate insider position (Taylor, 2011) required specific attention throughout the research process from accepting her request to participate through the final writing up.

The participant chose how to end the formal interview with signals such as longer pauses between stories or thanking me for talking to them. Once the recorder was turned off, a friendly off-the-record conversation took place, which I did not include in my data. Josselson (2007) refers to these as "debriefs" (p. 545) and argues they should include questions about how the participants feel, if they have additional questions, and thanking the participant. During the debriefs, I asked such questions and many participants asked me the same questions. They were eager to know if they had been helpful and requested copies of future publications. The debrief and the subsequent emails exchanged with my participants kept the dialogue open and gave the participants time to reflect on their involvement, contributions, and how I represented their stories.

3.4. Participant Selection and Recruitment

My research abided by the guidelines of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. This project was approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics

Committee (Project number 8274- see Appendix C) and the Victorian DET (Project number 2017_003340- see Appendix E). Upon approval, I notified the regional directors of each of the four DET regions that I planned to conduct research in their jurisdictions. I then emailed invitations to participate in the project to rural school principals around the state, with an intent to include a wide variety of rural communities and schools. Principals were contacted first via email in accordance with the DET's requirements. I requested the invitation be forwarded to the "person in charge of, or involved with, careers education" at their school, together with the Explanatory Statement, Consent Form, and Permission Letter (see Appendices F-H). These emails informed potential participants of the purpose of the research, as well as the potential benefits and harm. They were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time, that their participation was voluntary, and the ways in which I would protect their privacy.

While I intended to recruit participants across the state, the response rate was insufficient to make this a viable option. One participant was recruited, but later withdrew. A convenience sample, where participants are readily available to the researcher (Bryman, 2012), was then utilised. I knew from my time in the local careers Network that I had access to a pool of interested potential participants. While a convenience sample restricts the ability to generalise the findings, this was not a problem as generalisation was not an intention of the research. I had also preferred to involve pathways advisors who were strangers in order to avoid potential issues such as conflicts of interests, participants feeling they should participate as a favour, or the risks of assumed knowledge. Ultimately, I contacted local principals whose pathways advisors had previously expressed an interest in assisting me with my research when I had been a member of the Network. This resulted in the recruitment of five participants. The sixth participant, the woman who replaced me as pathways coordinator at my school, approached me with an interest in participating. While the sample size was six and the qualitative nature of this research prevents any widespread generalisation (Bryman, 2012), developing such generalisations was not a priority. A main consideration was the uniqueness of each pathways advisor and their experience, and how their particular circumstances influenced their approach to their work. Were the focus of this thesis not so tightly focused on the individual participants' experiences, this study could be re-framed as a case study of pathways advisors within the region. The sample size allowed me to analyse the data on an in-depth level and create a more extensive understanding of the relationships between pathways advising, rurality, and social justice.

Appropriate times for the interviews were then negotiated directly with the participants and conducted either in their office or a suitable space in their school. Despite the potential

issues of having previous relationships with participants, the established rapport and trust likely led to a more open and personal conversation. Josselson (2007) contends that:

> narrative research is founded in an encounter embedded in a relationship, the nature of the material disclosed is influenced not by the explicit contract but by the trust and rapport the researcher/interviewer is able to build with the participant… the participant is reading… subtle interpersonal cues that reflect the researcher's capacity to be empathetic, nonjudgmental, concerned, tolerant, and emotionally responsive… the 'data' that result reflect the degree of openness and self-disclosure the participant felt was warranted and appropriate under the *relational* circumstances she/he experienced. (emphasis in the original, p. 539)

All the participants were members of the careers practitioners' Network to which I had belonged. Our prior relationships amounted to knowing first names, schools, and participating in meetings once a month. The one exception to this was the replacement for my position as pathways coordinator at my school. I approached only those who had previously expressed an interest in my research and did so through their principal. Several declined the invitation. The shared experience of participating in the Network, working locally, and an expectation that we performed roughly the same roles within our respective schools, resulted in some assumed knowledge and shared language. For example, there were acronyms and processes that did not need explanation during the interviews. When there seemed to be a difference between what they thought I knew and what I actually did or how something was done, I clarified their meaning during the interview or through a follow-up email. These clarifications proved to be important as there were many assumed similarities between the schools that turned out to be not the case.

The recruitment process resulted in participants from a relatively small geographic area consenting to be part of the study. This meant that they also had existing professional relationships with each other. While these schools are located in the same region of the state, and often being considered 'similar,' my conversations with the participants clearly showed the differences between each community and their approaches to careers education and pathways advising. Below is a table introducing each of the participants and their respective roles within their school.

Table 3.1. Participants

Name	School	Title	Time Fraction	Careers Counselling Qualification	Teaching Area
Maxwell	Greenfield College P-12	Senior School Coordinator, "careers person," Chairman of Careers Expo	0.8	Yes	Year 7 Maths & senior Agriculture teacher
Gemma	Westfield College 7-12	Leading Teacher- Transitions and Pathways; Careers Advisor; President of local careers network	0.8	Yes	Year 12 English
Sally	Westfield College- Alternate Programs	Pathways and Transitions- Alternate Programs	1.0	No	VCAL in ConnectEd, Year 8 mainstream English
Nancy	Southwick Secondary College	Careers Advisor	1.0	Yes	Education Support Staff
Emily	Deerfield College P-12	Careers Advisor	0.2	No	Education Support Staff
Sarah	Wyben College P-12	Pathways Coordinator	0.6	No	VCE Maths

Statistical snapshots of the towns and schools of participants are located are provided in the Appendices (J & K). I include this information in order to demonstrate that despite these towns being relatively close to each other, within 150km, there are notable differences. These tables are not meant to be a holistic or complete description of the communities involved, nor do they encapsulate the nuance of rural social space. That is a lived experience and shared through the participants' voices in subsequent chapters. However, they do provide the reader with some sense of the variety of context within the participating towns and may be helpful references when reading the participant chapters.

3.5. Data Collection

The main data collection instrument used was narrative interview. The data generated by the interviews were supplemented with field notes and publicly available data about the school and its community.

3.5.1. Narrative interviews.

The purpose of using narrative interviews was to gain a detailed understanding of the complexity of participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). I conducted the interviews in an unstructured, conversational style to facilitate the participant's narration of their own stories. To stress the informal nature of the interviews, I referred to them as conversations with my participants, beginning with the use of this term in the invitation to participate. Ensuring there was flexibility to my interviews created "opportunity of genuinely revealing the perspectives of the people" (Bryman, 2012, p. 403). Before our conversations, participants were sent a short list of topics of interest, along with a reminder that they were free to choose which stories to tell. To ensure there was clarity for the participants, I piloted the interview guide with other local pathways advisors, including the head of careers education at a private school and several educators who were not the heads of careers education at their school. Based on their feedback and the experiences of conducting the interviews, I reduced the number of questions and focused more on the suggested topics of interest rather than specific individual questions. The suggested topics included four areas: background, motivation for being a careers educator, characteristics of careers program, and impacts of rural context. I used these topics as a starting point because they were likely to prompt the participants to discuss aspects of their work and to provide data to help answer my research questions. Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016) contend that providing a topic guide before the interview may help to put the participants at ease and provide clarity. It also gave them time to consider their stories and was a deliberate invitation for them to become narrators, although not all participants took advantage of the opportunity. This may have affected the content of their stories – for example, Sarah had not looked at the topic guide and did not know about several aspects of the careers program at her school, while Emily said she had looked at the guide and it prompted her to find out what the structure of the careers education program was at her school. The guides were also the first step to addressing Chase's (2005) paradox of narrative interviews where participants in our

"interview society" (p. 661) assume researchers want generalities and so they develop broad stories rather than experiences that are specific and meaningful to themselves. I began each conversation with a version of the prompt, 'Tell me about being a careers educator.' This is reflected in the formatting of the following chapters where I pose the question at the beginning then allow participants to relate their experiences. However, since many of the stories developed naturally through our conversation and were about their own experiences, it is impossible to know how much of an influence the guides actually were.

While participants had been provided with topics of interest, the interviews were very much conversations. The conversational style of the interviews provided the participants with more control over the format and content. Riessman (2008) points out that power will never be equal in a research interview, but a narrative interview begins to shrink the gap. The interviews had typical elements of conversation such as turn-taking and relevance, but often there were longer stretches of talking as the stories were being told. The conversational style also meant that there was a mutual construction of the stories being told (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Much of the mutual construction resulted from the shared experiences between us. Since I had worked with all of the participants in the same professional network, there were instances of comparing and contrasting various events or issues from our schools' perspectives. This often created a more nuanced and localised understanding of the topic being discussed. While doing this, I was mindful not to talk over them or to talk more than them. I wanted our time together to focus on their experiences, not mine, and so only went into detail about my own experiences when I was asked by the participants. This happened in varying degrees in the conversations. Gemma asked me relatively more explicit questions about how things were done at my school, while Sally and Emily asked very few questions about it. I also influenced the stories being told through use of "response tokens" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 93), phrases such as 'tell me more' or non-verbal cues such as head nodding, to propel a story forward. If there was a lull in the conversation, I would ask about a topic related to the interview guide that may not have been discussed yet, for example "can you tell me about your Work Experience program?" This tended to happen toward the end of the conversations. When later analysing the transcripts and re-storying the narratives, I paid attention to which topics I brought up in comparison to the directions participants took the conversation. Being mindful of my influence on the stories being told was one of the ways I endeavoured to enhance the trustworthiness of both the re-storied narratives and myself as the researcher and to ethically retain the participant as the primary owner of their stories.

As researcher, I had to be prepared to relinquish control over the format of the interviews, as well as be able to elicit more specific stories from participants through follow-up questions during the conversation (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Some of the most fascinating insights came from unexpected stories that might not have been told if I had kept a tighter control over the interview. This approach to interviewing, where the participant had more control over the interview, not only encouraged more meaningful stories, but also was important from a rural standpoint. I wanted to let participants speak for themselves "uninterrupted" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4), and not be spoken about. Following each interview, I reflected on my interviewing techniques in order to improve the quality of subsequent interviews.

Some challenges did arise during the *muddiness* of the interview sessions. Beuthin (2014) describes the muddiness of an interview as being where "tensions may arise between presence and performance, equality and power, leading and following, being an insider and outsider, influence and neutrality, and the tension between trust and responsibility" (p. 132). I was aware of my status as somewhat of an outside researcher, albeit one who had some knowledge and experience in the general area of rural pathways advising, coming into their specific context. However, our conversations were shaped by our shared experiences and knowledge. As the researcher, it was these instances that occasionally increased my sense of muddiness; at times it was difficult to remember I was the researcher and not simply a peer having a chat. The interview with Sarah (my replacement) felt particularly muddy as I had a different understanding of the role from her understanding. In several other interviews, I requested we postpone discussing certain topics until after the formal interview was over and the recorder was turned off. A particularly challenging instance was when I felt offended by Gemma's portrayal of my school's response to a student who was successfully recruited to Westfield College. In some of the interviews, we recalled shared experiences differently. For example, Maxwell and I have different recollections of a disagreement with the local principal's network. In each of these cases, I recorded my reactions in my field notes, then gave careful consideration to these episodes when analysing the narratives. As I explained earlier in this chapter, my focus was the experience from my participants' perspective, not my own.

3.5.1.1. Recording and transcription.

With the participants' permission, I digitally recorded all the interviews then manually transcribed them. The digital recordings were useful in the analysis phase as they captured the various tones of voice, silences, and other aural elements of storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). I transcribed five of the six interviews myself, and sent one to be professionally transcribed because of time constraints. Interview transcripts ranged from approximately 2,100 to 8,500 words. Despite the significant amount of time that manually transcribing required, it was a useful task. During transcription, I was able to engage with the data for extended periods of time and work with it literally word by word. I spent extra time listening and reading the professionally transcribed transcript to compensate for not transcribing it myself. Once the interviews were fully transcribed, I sent the transcripts to each participant for member checking. Participants were encouraged to clarify anything they felt necessary or to correct mistakes. One participant requested any curse words she used about students be removed and another corrected an acronym I had misheard. This was an important step to ensuring their voices were accurately captured, they were comfortable with their contribution, and that we had a shared understanding (Josselson, 2007). Once the participants had checked the transcripts, I then began the de-identifying process by assigning pseudonyms and masking features of the school and community, which, as Lanas and Rautio (2014) point out, is particularly challenging in rural settings when there is only one school in the community.

3.5.2. Field notes.

Field notes are "one of the primary tools" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5) of narrative researchers. They are a way to capture some of the social context in which the interview takes place (Creswell, 2006) and assists in fleshing out what Gubrium and Holstein (2009) refer to as the "narrative reality" (p. 2), where the contexts are as important as the stories themselves. These notes can include details such as a description of the physical setting or participant and researcher moods and body language (Creswell, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Not only are these details important to the analysis of the stories, they can also add to the plausibility of them (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). During the interviews, I made notes on the office space the school provided for pathways advising, on follow-up questions I might have, and on any strong reactions I had to topics discussed. Immediately following each interview, I audio recorded my initial reflections and memories of the conversation and the

setting. These recordings were expanded upon after a time of further reflection and a written summary of them was included in the memo for that interview. My field notes were useful in the analysis phase, particularly in terms of reflecting on my potential biases and assumptions.

3.5.3. Publicly available data.

Publicly available data were also used in this research to help contextualise the participants' narratives. This included the Australian Bureau of Statistics website, Community Indicators websites, MySchool websites, and individual school websites, which typically included newsletters and governing documents such as the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP). I also kept any school documents given to me by the participants, such as a subject selection booklet. I used this data sparingly in my analysis since my focus was on the participants' perceptions of their work. However, it was helpful to be able to look up specific details such as the percentage of students who enrolled in tertiary studies from a school or the way pathways was included in the AIP when participants had referenced something in passing in vague terms. For example, both Gemma and Sally made multiple references to the importance of their work being included in the College's AIP without providing specific details. By reading the AIP for myself, I was able to better understand what they meant in their interviews.

3.5.4. Data security.

I took care to ensure the proper management of my data. The audio files of interviews and my reflections were stored securely on password-protected computers and in password-protected apps. I only printed hard copies of de-identified texts to further protect participants' anonymity and kept them in a locked drawer in my locked office when I was not working with them. Any school documents or publicly available data that could not be de-identified were treated with discretion and stored behind a password or in a locked drawer.

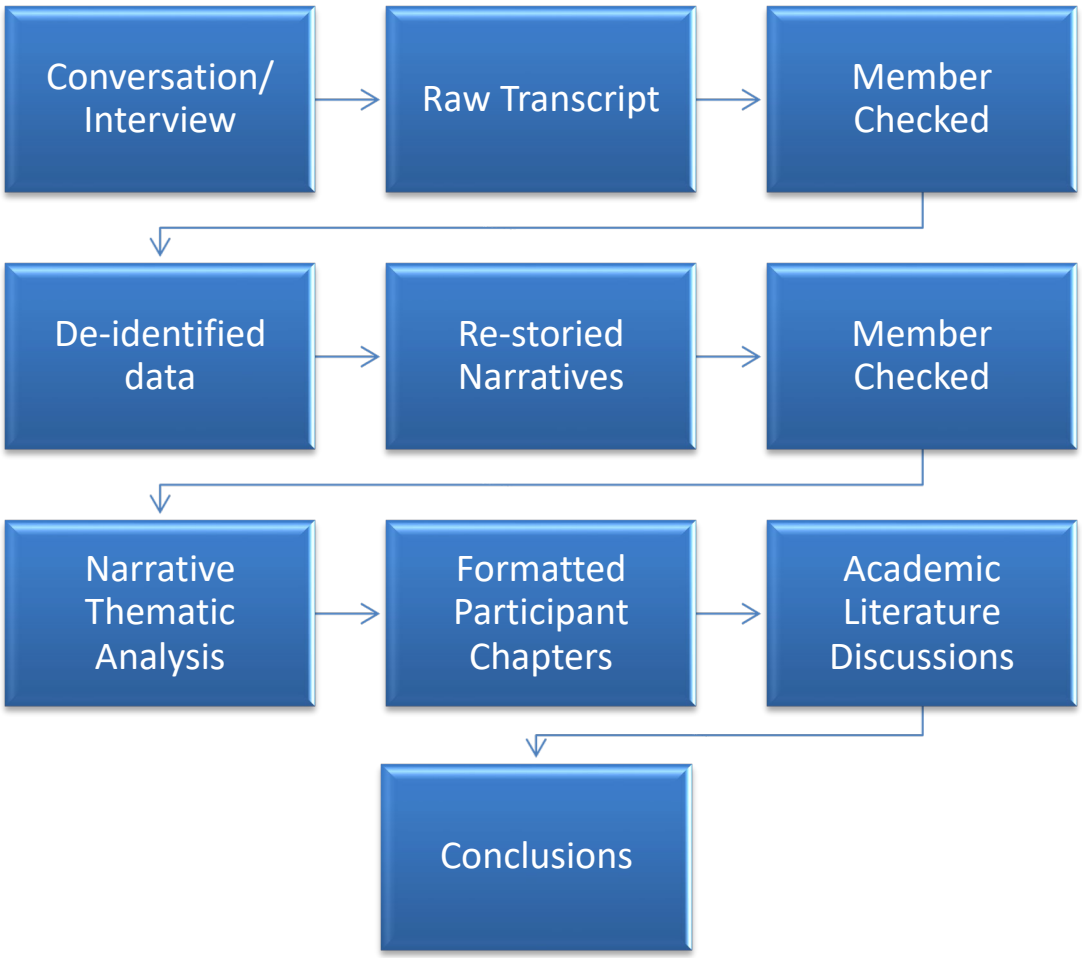
3.6. Data Analysis

Pinpointing the beginning of data analysis in narrative inquiry is all but impossible since it tends to be intertwined with data collection (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008).

Even during our conversations, my earliest interpretation of their stories shaped my responses and led me to ask certain follow-up questions. As my own experiences in the role and the knowledge of my participants' experiences increased with each interview, it affected how I initially understood and reacted during later conversations. I deliberately did not start any 'formal' analysis until all conversations were concluded. Following the analysis, I had to make a number of ethical considerations, discussed below, when it came to writing the participant chapters from the re-storied narratives. Participants did not co-write these chapters, so what was included was at my discretion. Researchers are in a powerful position; we decide what is seen or unseen in our projects through our data generation and analysis (Hamm, 2014). This is especially so in narrative research where "every aspect of the work is touched by the ethics of the research relationship" (Josselson, 2007, p. 537). My participants trusted me with their stories, so my analysis needed to reflect that trust and our mutual respect.

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) remind researchers to consider their role in the storytelling. They contend that the collaborator, that is, the researcher, often assists in directing where a story goes or what it is about, particularly in conversations. As Riessman phrases it "stories don't fall from the sky" (2008, p. 105), they are composed in context and with the researcher instigating them. Throughout the conversations of each interview, the 'how' and the 'what' of a story is developed together, necessitating a careful consideration in the analysis stage (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The audio recordings and field notes assisted me in noticing and considering my influence, including my use of response tokens.

Figure 3.1. Visualisation of Data Analysis



3.6.1. Creating the re-storied narratives.

Once all the transcripts were completed, member checked, and de-identified, I began the process of re-storying the narratives. This involved "reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework" (Creswell, 2006, p. 56) that highlighted important themes in a much clearer way than an unstructured hour-long conversation. Kim (2016) describes this as a form of "narrative smoothing" (p. 191), a two-step process to interpret and analyse the narratives; it serves to further explore the phenomenon and to assist the reader to understand. In my writing, this process involved Kim's (2016) concepts of *broadening*, including the broader context of the stories and adding a contextualising cultural framework, and *burrowing*, focusing in on specific details to consider the how and why, before structuring the re-storied narratives. Examples of

broadening included developing the participant portraits and the tables included earlier in this chapter and examples of burrowing included making "interpretive notes" (Chase, 2003, p. 92-93) and using my conceptual framework. These steps will be explained in more detail in the following section.

The case-by-case re-storied narratives included considerable direct speech, what Riessman (2008) terms "reported" or "reconstructed speech," so that participant voices were retained and their use of language to construct their stories and identities are preserved. The conversations unfolded as local peers discussing their work with a good deal of shared knowledge. While I was an outsider to their specific school context, I was an insider to the region, the Network, and rural pathways advising. As such, I was mindful of not using an "authoritarian voice" (Chase, 2005, p. 644) because I did not want to speak *for* them when my goal was to let the participants speak for themselves. Therefore, after opening the re-storied narrative by setting the scene, I used very few of my own words, just enough to stitch together the participants' quotes, and turned the bulk of the storytelling over to them.

In the re-storying, I shifted away from attempting to create a chronological narrative and focused instead on a "thematically coherent" (Kim, 2016, p. 203) story. I tagged chunks of the transcripts with keywords then reordered them to be thematically coherent. Each re-storied narrative loosely followed this structure, dependant on what participants said: illustrative vignette of the participant, my understanding of the context - town, school, personality of the participant - of the interview, how the participant became a careers educator, their favourite parts of the role, their successes, and their challenges. 'Building to a climax' or following a chronology for each re-storied narrative was difficult because they are not single stories with plotlines in the traditional literary sense. Instead, I tried to build to something that was unique to each participant – Maxwell and the Expo or Gemma and her feud with the DET. An examples of the re-storied narratives can be found in Appendix L.

I then emailed the re-storied narratives back to the participants for their further input and asked a few follow-up questions for clarity. While this step made me slightly anxious for them to see my early attempts at interpreting their meanings, it was an important one in equalising the power dynamic and ensuring the validity of the re-storied narratives (Riessman, 2008). I was concerned that participants may be uncomfortable with my initial insights into the developing themes that the re-storied narratives highlighted. By re-ordering topics from our conversations and collating their ideas, would participants realise they had said things they did not mean or

how much they had emphasised certain concepts? Would Sarah realise how many times she said she did not know about various elements of her school's careers education and pathways program? Would Maxwell take umbrage with how his strong views on local parents were presented? I had a positive response from each participant, expect for Sarah who did not respond, nor had she responded to the opportunity to verify her transcript. I considered contacting Sarah via SMS or Messenger, but each of my emails did say that a response was not necessary if there were no concerns. Those who responded included comments such as "I sound stupid" in their message to me, but they were happy with the content and structure. I responded to their concerns with a reminder that I had disrupted the flow of the conversation and verbatim conversations can read poorly when written down. I also reassured them that any quotes I use publicly and, in the thesis, would be polished up (removing the 'ums' and indications of hesitation, and so on).

3.6.2. Analysing the re-storied narratives.

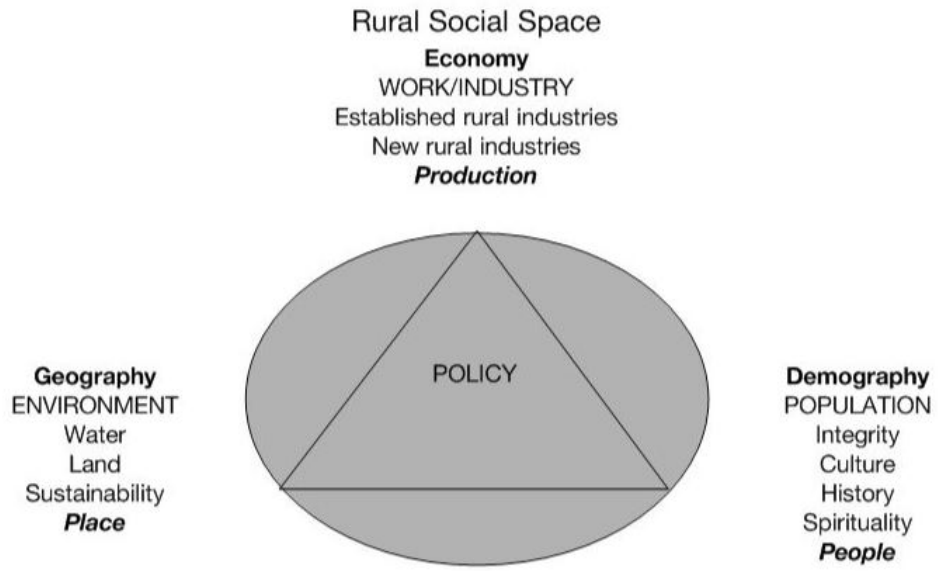
I decided to use a narrative thematic analysis since, unlike a grounded approach to thematic coding analysis, it considers the story as a whole, and the text is not broken up (Riessman, 2008). Analysis of the re-storied narratives was completed in several stages. First, I developed short, textual portraits of each participant, which included contextual information about the school and their specific role. This enabled me to explore how these factors may influence their work. These portraits served as a snapshot and as a starting point for articulating the uniqueness of each participant through an "effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002, p. xv). I then went through each of the re-storied narratives and made interpretive notes in the margins on aspects of: insights into their work and priorities, contradictions, focused areas of concern/ passion, or anything unique that emerged from the data. Next, I used the conceptual frameworks laid out in Chapter Two to guide the analysis around themes of rural social space and social justice. My application of these frameworks is discussed below. By using ideas from my conceptual framework, I looked for "novel theoretical insights" (Riessman, 2008, p. 74) provided by the participants. I did this by colour-coding themes in the re-storied narratives based on the conceptual frameworks, then collating the relevant quotes together under appropriate headings and subheadings. I explored these themes further by going through my previous notes, initial

reflections, listening to the audio recordings again, and re-reading the re-storied narratives with 'fresh eyes' after a short break.

3.6.2.1. Application of Conceptual Framework.

Using Reid et al.'s (2010) model (see Figure 3.1.) of rural social space allowed me to analyse participants' sense of their community and its effects on their work from multiple perspectives. From my own experience as a pathways advisor, I knew that the role required me to have knowledge about the local demography, economy, and geography. While analysing the re-storied narratives, I identified instances when participants mentioned something about their work concerning the local population, work force, and their location. It quickly became clear that separating the work of pathways advisors into three distinct categories would be difficult as they are so interrelated. For example – the local land affected the types of local industries, which in turn affected the population size. So, through the analysis and construction of the participant chapters, the data is not necessarily broken into subheadings based on phrases from the model, but rather by examples of how issues of place, work, and economics manifested themselves in the participant stories. For example, quite often the pathways advisors' stories about their rural social space centred on the need for strong relationships and considerations of how to handle the framing of youth staying local for work or leaving the community for other opportunities.

Figure 3.2. Rural Social Space model



(Reid et al., 2010, p. 266)

When using Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic conceptualisation of social justice for rural education to analyse the re-storied narratives, I identified examples of each type of justice. For distributed justice, I considered issues related to funding, access to resources, and equality of opportunity. When considering recognitional justice, I looked for issues related to outsiders misunderstanding groups such as pathways advisors or rural communities and the self-identified characteristics of these groups. Finally, for associational justice I considered issues relating to voice and authentic participation in decision making. Generally, the influences on advisors' work presented as: distributed justice being challenges in accessing a variety of career/pathways exploration activities, recognitional justice as widespread misunderstanding of the nature of their role, and associational justice as something that could be improved through participation in the Network. I retained the distinction between each type of justice via the use of subheadings in each of the participant chapters. In the following section I describe in further detail how I decided to organise the structure of those chapters.

3.6.2.2. Constructing participant chapters.

The findings revealed by the analysis of the re-storied narratives are presented in the participant chapters, which follow this chapter. Each participant is presented in his or her own chapter so that the individuality of each person, role, and context is highlighted. I have written the findings of these chapters in a narrative style with participants' voices interwoven with mine (theirs are in italics) to stress the collaborative nature of the data and to keep their voices central to the story. With these chapters, I was mindful of what to include and what not to include. Josselson (2007) warns of the difficulties researchers who want to "give voice" (p. 548) to their participants face around ownership of the narrative. As I analysed the re-storied narratives through my conceptual framework, I may have not have fully represented what the participants meant since they discussed many things. I attempted to mediate this dilemma by including long quotes from participants when possible and interweaving our voices. This is also why the structure of each chapter reflects that of the re-storied narratives. After the findings are presented, each chapter includes a discussion of the most significant issues with reference to the relevant academic literature and conceptual framework. Developing these sections served as another layer of analysis as I engaged with further consideration of the data through the lenses of my conceptual framework. This layer of analysis assisted me in elaborating on the "novel theoretical insights" (Riessman, 2008, p. 74) expressed by participants.

3.6.3. Developing conclusions.

Throughout the research, participants were considered individually to keep their voices intact and to highlight the heterogeneity of rural schools. However, the last layer of analysis was across all participants in order to holistically address the main research question: *How is the experience of being a pathways advisor shaped by their rurality?* This discussion was shaped by the themes developed in each participant chapter and is presented in the Chapter Ten. There is not a singular answer to the research question, rather the purpose of this layer of analysis was to explore the key learnings that arose from the various elements of the conceptual frameworks.

3.7. Summary

In this chapter, the methodology and research design were presented. First, I stated my epistemological position of social constructionism and how my conceptualisation of knowledge being created when humans interact with the world and how this has shaped my research design. Next, I stated my research questions that focused my study on exploring the influence of rural social space and social justice on rural pathways advisors' work. My research design began with an explanation of my positioning to the research as something of an insider and outsider of the group under study. I then went through the key methodological and ethical considerations I made in order to conduct respectful rural education research and a trustworthy narrative inquiry. Then I described the process of participant recruitment and selection which resulted in the participants being known to me and from the same region. In this section, I introduced the various participants and their contexts. The final sections dealt with the data collection and analysis process. Here I described how and why I conducted narrative interviews in a conversational style as well as how I used field notes and publicly available data. I also outlined my analysis process that included the steps I used in creating the co-constructed narratives, the involvement of participants, and my application of the Conceptual Framework that utilised Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space and Cuervo's (2016) call for a more pluralist sense of social justice in rural education.

The following six chapters present the findings and discussion of the six participants. In these chapters, I explore the experiences of the participants and consider how their rurality has influenced their work.

Introduction to Participant Chapters

In the next six chapters, I present my findings and discussions for each of the participants. These chapters explore in depth the lived experiences of participants; the table in the Methodology Chapter (Chapter Three), provided contextual details of each participant, their role, and their school. The title of each of these chapters is a phrase taken from the interview. It is a description of a key element of their work in their own words. While participants often referred to similar issues or challenges, I have deliberately avoided highlighting the occurrence of any repetition or contradiction within these six chapters. The purpose is to highlight the individuality of each pathways advisor and provide space for them to describe their role in their own context. These chapters are not meant to act as a comparison between participants.

Each of these chapters is divided into two distinct parts. The first is the findings sections that reflect the re-storied narratives. In this part, I used a narrative style with participants' voices (in italics) interwoven with mine to stress the collaborative nature of the data gathered through the back-and-forth of our conversation as well as a way to keep their voices central. Also, in the finding sections I use the participant's self-identified title and terms when referring to their role and work. This is to allow participants to define their role for themselves and to keep ownership over the stories of their experiences.

The second part of each of the participant chapters is the discussion section which is shaped by my conceptual framework (described in Chapter Two) guided by Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space and Cuervo's (2016) call for a more pluralistic sense of social justice in rural education, as well as other relevant literature. This section of each chapter explores the most relevant concepts from the literature raised by each participant in order to address the research questions. In these sections – as in the rest of the thesis – I use the broader term of pathways advisors in order to signify the 'bigger picture' considerations.

Finally, there is an intrinsic link between rural social space and social justice – an important consideration in itself. This link made it difficult to analyse participants' co-constructed narratives by distinct elements or to answer the sub-questions individually. This is why in the following chapters, a particular challenge may be presented in one chapter, for example, as an issue of distributive justice when it is discussed as an issue of rural social space in another chapter. The decisions on where to present an issue in each chapter were based on how

the participant framed the challenge. This came down to the elements of the challenge they focused on – such as did they explain it as a lack of funding issue or largely due to geographic location – or other context clues including tone of voice or what was discussed immediately before or after. My decision about where and how to present each challenge was meant to reflect the intention of the participant, which again highlights the interplay of rural social space and social justice in the *thisness* (Thomson, 2000) of each school.

Chapter Four: "The World According to Maxwell"

So, everyone needs to have an equal opportunity, that's what I'm on about probably. That would be the basis of my philosophy… The reason I am in the public system is because of where I have come from and a belief that everyone should be given equal opportunities in education and to be successful in life, whatever that may mean for that person. This is a view instilled in me by my parents and reinforced in the various positions I have held in work and in the community. I am still firm in this belief, but get disappointed with the divide in education between the haves and the have nots.

4.1. Part One: Being a rural *Careers Person*

Maxwell's description of his work was not limited to the advising role he had at Greenfield College for more than a decade. He also elaborated more generally on careers education and pathways for rural students in the region, which were central to his external volunteer roles as treasurer of the Network and the chairperson of the Careers Expo[8]. There were no formal careers education classes at Greenfield College, instead there were several programs available to students and he embedded elements of pathway planning into the subjects he taught.

Maxwell identified his accumulated knowledge of various pathways and local needs as his greatest strength. He measured his success as a careers person[9] by whether or not his students go on to be *positive contributors to society… I don't necessarily devalue employment opportunities or outcomes depending on what the jobs are... So, that might mean going to university for some, but for a lot of kids it doesn't mean that*. Maxwell stated that he needed to have a strong understanding of the local industries, local employers, and university pathways.

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[8] The Network is a professional network of local pathways advisors from public and private schools as well as other stakeholders such as community groups and tertiary institutions.

The Careers Expo is a locally held event that showcases potential pathways to students and community members. Tertiary institutions, industries, and local employers have stalls and give presentations throughout the day.

[9] Maxwell identified his title as the 'careers person' for Greenfield College, but his formal title is 'Senior School Coordinator.' He refers to other pathways advisors as 'careers teachers.'

4.1.1. Changing demographics.

Maxwell claimed declining enrolments was the biggest issue facing rural schools, including his own. He explained the ripple effect this had on schools. Fewer students meant fewer staff and fewer Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) subjects on offer. The narrowing of the curriculum limited student pathways and aspirations. Alternate delivery methods, like video conferencing or Distance Education were available and likely to become more widespread, but were not ideal. Maxwell noted that the Department of Education and Training (DET) had provided video conferencing equipment but that principals did not support it; they cited difficulties in timetabling classes across a number of schools. He also worried that despite small schools' best efforts to provide a variety of opportunities, *kids vote with their feet*. Maxwell expressed concerns about Greenfield College's ability to compete with regional boarding schools and Westfield College – only 20 minutes away – due to their limited senior school curriculum.

As well as the population getting smaller, Maxwell also commented on the change in local demographics. He saw this as a result of the generational-shift in farming and the cheap housing available in the region. *We've got a lot of kids now who are exposed to generational unemployment. The parents come up here because maybe they don't have to work … or they haven't got enough money to buy a house.* Maxwell detailed some of the effects this change in demographics had on his work. He had to alter the type of advice given and programs to offer, such as the need to case-manage students and implement a hands-on learning intervention program where local tradesmen came to the school and worked with a small group of at-risk students on projects around campus. He wanted to see more parents interacting with the school in order to better help their students.

The main difference Maxwell saw in his work was around the increased expectations for schools to teach values. *When I first started … we had these kids, and they were great. They were rough diamonds, pretty rough, and they had a bad background. And I remember talking to the principal at the time saying, 'they haven't got any values.' And he directly said to me, 'we don't teach values to them at school. What we do is we teach information and content. That's what we teach. That's what their parents do.' I don't know when it was, probably in the late '80s, early '90s when the government recognised that giving money to parents was wasteful because they never spend it on what they're supposed to. So, they started channelling people['s] money to schools, and then all of a sudden we're supposed to be teaching them values… It's*

really important these days, but it shouldn't be… so, someone's not doing what they're supposed to do and I would suggest a lot of parents have got a lot to answer for probably. So, Maxwell adjusted his approach to working with these students. He found that his role required him to have more empathy, be more flexible, and to be able to think laterally. One of the highlights of his work was when he learnt that a student who struggled to complete school achieved a positive outcome.

4.1.2. Student aspirations and personal responsibility.

Maxwell drew a connection between these parents and a greater difficulty in raising rural student aspirations. At the start of his career he noticed that the farming community encouraged their youth to seek out further qualifications before returning to the farm. Now he recognised that the region's workforce had changed and students were not *exposed to a range of… professional role models. That's always been the case in the country, but now we've got kids whose parents occupy particular types of employment, if they are employed.* Maxwell acknowledged that part of his role involved preparing students to leave the community to experience a wider variety of careers and opportunities for their futures, which might further change the local workforce.

From Maxwell's point of view, exploring possible pathways was increasingly difficult due to the sharp decrease in students' sense of personal responsibility. He noticed that students found it difficult to make decisions and speculated that was because parents made decisions for them. Maxwell found that he could only do so much for these students because of time constraints. *If they don't rise to the occasion, I'll move on to someone else… which is a shame.* He identified several crucial points where students needed to show initiative, namely organising their Work Experience, their Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Vocational Education Training (VET) work placements, and their School-based Apprenticeships (SBA).

Maxwell encouraged students to build their sense of responsibility through exposure to working life outside of classrooms. He considered the Melbourne Work Experience Camp as a major opportunity to learn *about being self-sufficient and having to make decisions for yourself when there's no one else about … I mean that's invaluable.* Maxwell advocated for part-time work since it gave students a taste of what would be required of them in a workplace.

Additionally, he taught a unit where he detailed the process of getting work, which had assisted students gaining employment.

4.1.3. Work Experience and VET.

Maxwell had been coordinating a Melbourne Work Experience Camp, where the Year 11s were exposed to urban jobs and living. He had been finding it increasingly difficult to run and justify this enterprise. While he had persisted with the camp, he encountered obstacles with hesitant parents, finding city employers, and costs. He thought some parents were reluctant to send their child away because they themselves were unfamiliar with the city or were worried that their children would subsequently want to leave after Year 12. Maxwell had started to find it difficult to place students with city employers if there was not an existing relationship. In terms of expanding the pool of potential workplaces, he did not know which businesses were accepting students for placements or which would be likely to provide positive experiences for them. However, once a relationship was established, Maxwell tended to be able to sustain it. *We've had kids go to places for years and years and they [workplaces] are always happy to have country kids because country kids are more likely to engage and get on with it*. Ideally, he wanted a database of willing employers that was free to access to make the placement process more efficient and assist non-locals to find appropriate matches. A final challenge he identified with the camp was cost, which was roughly $600 for the week for hostel lodging, public transport, and meals.

He reported a different challenge for students that wanted to complete local, agriculture-based Work Experience. There were a number of restrictions placed on activities considered too dangerous and that created legal liability. These prohibited activities were often common tasks in local agriculture-based jobs and might be activities that students had extensive experience with on their family farms, such as operating certain types of equipment or handling animals. *I mean OH&S [Occupational Health and Safety] is really important… but if they're just going to observe… no one wants to do that. And increasingly when I send out … the list of prohibited activities… I always get phone calls… the animal stuff drives me nuts and it puts employers off. It does, it puts them off. So, it's all too hard and by the time you finish reading the list, 'well, what am I going to do?'* Occupational Health and Safety regulations did not reflect the everyday experiences of the students or suit the employers, so Maxwell felt they jeopardised the availability of finding students relevant work placements.

The challenges associated with the local VET program were similar, but Maxwell was most concerned with the increasing costs and travel burdens. Greenfield College students, along with students from other rural schools in the area, participated in the VET program run through Westfield providers. Maxwell discussed the need to preserve the collective nature of the VET hub since it was the only opportunity for students from smaller schools to access the courses they needed. The fees for courses were onerous for families, [10] so Maxwell took advantage of the three-week trial window to ensure the student was a good fit. Maxwell also thought that there should be more funding to subsidise travel. He explained that on top of course fees, students had to pay for their weekly travel, up to $10 a week. Maxwell considered these students additionally disadvantaged because of the considerable time they spent commuting and praised their commitment to their studies.

4.1.4. Problematic principals.

Maxwell considered these obstacles to be growing and required more attention from principals. He expressed concerns that many principals did not have a strong understanding of the nature of careers advising, and vitally, the amount of time it took to perform the role well. Maxwell understood his role as one that was meant to give students advice rather than lay out a prescriptive plan for a student. *It's not about telling people what to do, and someone needs to tell the principals that it's not about telling people what to do.* As a result of this misunderstanding – Maxwell's reported approach to advising took more time than handing a student a plan – he worried about the impacts of principals reducing time allowances for advisors. He pointed out that many aspects of the role needed to happen during school hours, like interviews with students. With principals not understanding the time-demands on careers advisors or the scope of their role, Maxwell claimed this led to advisors becoming overstretched. He identified feeling overcommitted as the worst part of his job. *You're trying to keep more in the air, that's the worst bit. I mean there's times in your life when that's going to happen, but increasingly they keep adding balls, 'Here's another one.' I think you don't juggle as well… if you're overcommitted.* Throughout the interview, Maxwell described finding time for careers exploration elements of his role in terms such as *lumped in* and *just try and keep it all afloat*.

[10] Since this interview, the government has responded to this issue. As of January 1, 2019, the Victorian government has made 30 TAFE courses and 20 apprenticeship pathway courses fee-free for eligible students.

Maxwell identified that a significant amount of his time was devoted to developing and sustaining various partnerships and relationships that were necessary in order to support students. *The administration needs to appreciate that, right across the board if you want to have good relationships with community, parents, lots of one-to-one activity with students and things, you've got to support that. If you're not going to support that, it's not going to happen.* He gave the examples of SBAs and work placements, two programs that could lead to positive outcomes for students, but required considerable time to set up and then then for him to liaise between the potential employer and the student. With limited local employers, *we're always relying on the good will… which I suppose is pretty common amongst careers teachers*. Maxwell pointed out that sustaining positive relationships with employers took time but was worthwhile.

The effects of misunderstanding careers advising extended beyond individual schools and led to some difficulties with the principal's network – which consisted of principals from the same schools as members of the local Careers Network. Maxwell explained there had been doubts raised about the necessity of Network meetings and the Careers Expo. He expressed irritation that judgements were cast without many having even attended an Expo or having participated in a Network meeting. Maxwell told an anecdote about how the relationship between the groups improved with an increase in mutual understanding and better communication. *There was no buy in from them at all… but… we had a meeting… and about four of them turned up… But fortunately, we were, as always, very well organised and spoke through a few issues and all that sort of thing. Interestingly, half of them had to go talk on their mobile phones or something like that when they realised that we were right. I reckon they were after us then, but now I think we've sort of freshened up our approach to them and that's something we need to be mindful of.* As he reflected on this incident, Maxwell acknowledged the value of the partnership and its necessity for providing quality pathways advice and exploration to students.

Maxwell claimed that the lack of understanding of careers advising had led to a lack of proper resourcing and support. He stated that this started with politicians and the DET only paying periodic attention to things like SBAs, or notions of setting up agricultural high schools, even the Victorian Parliament's recent Inquiry. He did not expect anything to come of the Inquiry besides more blame on the careers teachers, but hoped it will result in structural improvements that involved more funding and a return to the DET employing careers development coordinators.

4.1.5. Professional learning and the Network.

Maxwell was worried that some of the local careers teachers were not qualified nor engaged in professional learning as they tried to deal with growing careers-related challenges. *They should be supported in that… I think as part of the role, you need to have a little bit of knowledge about the local, regional, and state-wide employment opportunities and that's something that's really important… And also to be involved in your local careers teachers' group, because if you're not doing that, how do you know what's going on? I think that isolation – because of the nature of what's happening at regional schools' declining enrolments, all those sorts of things, people end up [with] a whole heap of different jobs.* He reported trying to stay up-to-date himself, but found the Careers Education Association of Victoria (CEAV) conference in Melbourne to be frustrating since they tended to focus on urban issues that were not necessarily applicable to his context. With unqualified advisors and a lack of a DET contact, he expressed doubts about programs in other schools.

Maxwell highlighted the importance of participating in the local Network. *The great thing about Network meetings is it's the sharing of ideas and also just being able to talk to other people about what they're doing, how they're doing it, and all those sorts of things, and making sure that everything you are talking about is current, up-to-date and factual, which is really important.* Despite the importance of meetings, Maxwell explained that it was becoming increasingly difficult for people to attend. He thought this was due in part to how time-poor and overcommitted teachers were, which resulted in meetings focusing on organising the Expo at the expense of conducting other professional learning activities.

A key benefit Maxwell found from the Network was that it served as a collective source of local knowledge. However, he expressed concerns about the high turnover rate of careers teachers. *It was a very well-established group. You knew everyone and if you had a problem, you'd just ring someone up, and now there's… probably a couple left… if you just turned up and you had a careers question, what do I do?* Maxwell identified the longer-serving careers teachers acted as both advocates for rural students and mentors for new advisors.

4.2. Careers Expo

Maxwell did not speak of the Expo as an additional job, but as an important aspect of his work as a careers person. He had been involved with the Careers Expo for as long as he had been involved in careers education. He enjoyed the role, despite the stress. *It's good to be under a bit of pressure …and it's good pressure... It's good to get your head out of the mud and look around and see what other people are up to, and that's really good to be able to engage with employers and… with providers…is all really good and that's always been a positive experience.*

He also explained why it was important to host such an event locally. It made it easier for students and families to access since it did not require extensive travel, which meant more students would be likely to attend. At the annual Expo, there were also opportunities for people to meet face-to-face with tertiary providers and registered training organisations (RTO) to ask their questions without needing to travel to multiple campuses. Finally, the Expo committee had been able to shape its program around local priorities and jobs. *We try and mix it up so that there's lots of different things happening and if you want specific information you go to seminars or you can go and talk to stallholders, or you can actually go and try a trade and have a go… There's lots of really good outcomes.*

Looking forward, Maxwell was concerned that with the experienced careers teachers retiring and many of the newer ones burning out, there was no one to take up the leadership of the Expo. At the time of the interview, the executive committee was composed of the Westfield careers teachers and a part-time employed executive officer. *The Expo is a priority... And we've been lucky in that we've had people who've been able to carry it on, carry it through, but that sort of planning for [the] next generation, I'm a little bit concerned about that. We need to try and identify someone pretty soon.* Maxwell said that he was worried that the way schools organised their careers programs and overburdened the careers teachers would make it difficult for anyone to volunteer to take up the leadership roles.

4.3. Part Two: Discussion

Maxwell expressed a number of concerns and challenges affecting his work that directly related to his community and issues of social justice. These centred on the need for pathways advisors to know their rural social space. By knowing their community and students, Maxwell

contended that pathways advisors were better suited to their role and could respond to issues of social justice more appropriately.

4.3.1. Rural social space.

Maxwell repeatedly stressed the importance of pathways advisors having local knowledge, which involved knowing the people, the industry, and considering its future. He presented this as integral to the advisor's ability to do their job effectively and responsibly. The significance of rural educators understanding the economics, geography, and demographics of their communities was the basis for Reid et al.'s (2010) rural social space model and Douglas' (2012) critical framework for careers practitioners, where she stressed the need to understand the relationships between the social issues, politics, and economic concerns of clients. Both teaching, the subject of Reid et al.'s work, and careers guidance, the subject of Douglas', required highly contextualised knowledge in order to provide ethical, practical information to their student/client. As part of their justification for the need to consider rural social space in pre-service teachers, Reid et al. (2010) explained that knowing the place "is essential both in terms of ensuring the relevance and connectedness of the curriculum" (p. 272) and this meant understanding the "reality of the everyday life that is 'there' rather than 'elsewhere'" (p. 272). When paired with Douglas'(2012) assertion that careers practitioners "are at the interface of the paradox between individual need and the collective complexities of labour markets and social policy" (p. 38) – i.e. that advisors needed to understand larger, system-wide contexts as well as an individual's context – Maxwell's identification of the importance of local knowledge reflected the complexity of the role. From Maxwell's perspective, knowing the technical details of the role – for example which forms have which deadlines – was secondary to understanding the lived reality of the people he worked with. Throughout his narrative Maxwell explained that gaining this knowledge took time and experience, two elements of the role that he considered to be ill-acknowledged by school leaders and policymakers.

4.3.1.1. Influences of local geography.

Maxwell's narrative revealed a number of ways his role was influenced by his community's geographical context and his understanding of it. He described how his work engaged with the local geography, for example, through his knowledge of harvest and other

agriculture-related jobs as well as his expressed need for a regional careers expo that incorporated both urban and rural pathway options. While he was originally placed in the region, his understanding of the local needs, specifically in terms of its agriculture, developed over time and had been influenced by his experiences in the *Teacher Release to Industry Program* at the Agriculture College. His experience of coming to understand the community over time, was a long-term example of why Reid and colleagues (2010) warned against the "educational 'tourism'" (p. 271) of short-term visits to rural schools by pre-service teachers. These short visits might only play into negative stereotypes and were inadequate to explore the rural social space. Maxwell's initial reaction to his placement was negative, but with time he came to know his place and his perspective changed.

Another geographical issue he raised was the pressure for the College to compete with Westfield schools for student enrolments since Westfield, with its much larger public high school and two private schools, was just 20 minutes down the road. With limited staff and resources to provide a variety of VCE subjects, he worried that some of the more academically inclined students would enrol in Westfield, which added to Greenfield's declining enrolment problems. Morgan and Blackmore (2013) expanded on the consequences of declining enrolments, specifically of the top students, in small rural schools as affecting: funding, the "social mix of the school and the classroom" (p. 105), school achievement data, less parental involvement, and further difficulties in recruiting staff. They posited that the impacts of Australian policies that encouraged school choice were not just an urban issue, but that rural families with means were not restricted by distance "to enhance their children's positional advantage" (p. 108). While Maxwell identified some of the consequences laid out by Morgan and Blackmore, he attributed them to an influx of lower socioeconomic families to town, rather than seeing these negative consequences stemming from a more complex situation.

4.3.1.2. Declining local job opportunities.

Maxwell made repeated mentions of how Greenfield's shift from a thriving agriculture-based economy had affected his work and changed the needs of his students. His description of the changes that affected his town reflected the ongoing restructuring of rural communities through their economies and populations (Cuervo, 2016) which was affecting career prospects for local youth and might be influencing their aspirations through the community's devaluing of formal education and a reduction of role models available to students (Polesel, 2009). Cuervo

(2016) described the restructuring of Australian rural communities in part as a result of consolidation in the agriculture sector and a decline in its contribution to the GDP. Fewer farms meant fewer workers which resulted in smaller towns with fewer support services – like healthcare and hospitality. The decrease in locally available jobs limited the future job market for youth and might affect their aspirations, particularly when many of these jobs might not require tertiary qualifications (Alston & Kent, 2006). Corbett and Forsey (2017) asserted that "it can be difficult for many rural youth to imagine careers that are essentially invisible on the local landscape" (p. 432) which was especially problematic in declining/threatened productivist rural communities. Their description of such communities echoed Maxwell's of Greenfield – significant declines in agriculture and population with increases in temporary and seasonal work. The labour market in Greenfield was at odds with the typical educational discourse of aspirations. It largely consisted of "precisely the kind of work young people are told offers no future… yet it is ubiquitous and available" (Corbett & Forsey, 2017, p. 441). The lack of personal responsibility that Maxwell attributed to some of his students might be a result of the "symbolic violence that induces low SES students to see themselves as in deficit" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 233) when their aspirations – the locally available jobs – did not match the traditional, meritocratic-based aspirations dialogue present in education discourse (see Section 2.1.3.). While Maxwell attempted to encourage and highlight a variety of local career options, addressing the disconnect between some of his students' aspirations seemed to be a source of frustration.

These issues sat within in the larger consideration of rural Stayers and Leavers (see Section 2.1.4.). Maxwell's narrative placed his role at the heart of the tensions between staying and leaving. His description of his work showed that a great deal of his time – both in and out of Greenfield College – was spent attempting to increase the aspirations of rural students. While Irving (2012) stressed the importance of assisting students to explore the rapidly changing and expanding field of options for future work, in rural communities it could lead to concerns about, or work to bolster, community sustainability. Problems arose when these opportunities fed into the rural as deficit model – when urban jobs, opportunities, and expectations were considered the goal – which created tension between the "image of the 'successful' mobile student and the unsuccessful 'stuck' other" (Corbett, 2010, p. 227). Corbett (2010) further elaborated that the "problem of youth outmigration and brain drain is juxtaposed in tension with the concern for those children who do not leave" (p. 227). Maxwell's narrative included several examples of

how he attempted to address this tension in his work. An illustrative example of this was his work on the local Careers Expo with its combination of local and urban pathway options.

Furthermore, Petrin, Schafft, and Meece (2014) found that schools could have a positive influence in encouraging students to stay, or return to, rural communities and that it was "student perceptions of employment opportunities that differentiate Leavers from Stayers" (p. 322). Maxwell worked to improve his students' perceptions of local employment opportunities through his focus on VET pathways and the development of positive relationships between local employers and students. His focus on VET pathways was a reflection of his students' interests in learning a trade to stay local. Greenfield College had the highest percentage of students pursuing TAFE in the study: in 2016, 42% went on to TAFE while 25% went to university. Supporting students into vocational pathways appeared to have taken up most of his time at school and required a number of partnerships in the community.

4.3.1.3. Value of partnerships.

Maxwell established a variety of partnerships with local employers since he recognised the importance of exposing students to as many options as possible. While he considered this central to his work, he expressed concern that principals did not. Broadbent and Cacciattolo (2013) asserted "the success of careers programs is a reflection of the quality of the partnerships that exist between schools and community organisations" (p. 115) and so the relationships that Maxwell developed with local employers was crucial. The positive relationships facilitated pathways for students and had assisted in the development and success of the re-engagement programs. However, this was a fraught area of his work. Maxwell needed relationships with multiple employers to be successful in his role. Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams, and Jago (2017) contended that these partnerships in rural communities were mutually beneficial and could create "a more authentic, fit-for-the-future" (p. 169) approach to career planning. They argued that when rural schools, community organisations, and local industry worked together to prepare students for their future careers, students could make better-informed decisions. Local communities and industries helped to shape their future workers. These partnerships took significant time to cultivate, could be jeopardised by difficult students, and was an aspect of the pathways role that Maxwell's principal did not seem to highly value. These employers also acted as role models, especially in the hands-on learning re-engagement program, to the students

which could be particularly important when a significant number have been exposed to generational poverty and unemployment.

4.3.2. Social justice.

The issues Maxwell discussed that reflected the context of his community raised similar issues of social injustices facing his work and students. These involved issues of community sustainability and access to opportunities. Maxwell's narrative echoed Cuervo's (2016) findings that "teachers argued not only for greater distribution of resources but also for a greater participation in the decisions that affected their work and life" (p. 130). Cuervo's (2016) detailing of these "notions of plural conceptualizations of social justice in education entailed self-respect for their work – including how they are regarded by others (mostly parents and the state), empowerment, autonomy, and decision-making power" (p. 131), could also be seen in Maxwell's narrative. In analysing Maxwell's description of his work, he identified a number of issues of distributive justice based on a lack of resources – which included an inequality of access to opportunities for his students – with proposed solutions that required a redistribution of funds. His narrative also revealed a strong focus on the need to improve the recognitional justice for rural communities as well as pathways advisors. This involved a reconsideration of what pathways/careers were considered viable both locally and elsewhere. Finally, much of his work could be seen as attempts to improve these inequalities through an increase in associational justice. There were several avenues that Maxwell tried to use to speak up for the rural and for pathways advisors to become more involved in decision-making, but he expressed concerns over the effectiveness of these outlets – such as the government inquiry and the Network.

4.3.2.1. Distributive justice: The struggle for equality of opportunity.

Maxwell's narrative revealed a number of challenges caused by a lack of resources and he identified the ways in which they affected his work and negatively impacted on his students. Many of the solutions he proposed to these issues were distributive in nature, such as subsidies for the Work Experience Camp and VET bus travellers. The resourcing he wanted often amounted to attempts to level the playing field for his students – to overcome the inequities experienced because of their geographic location. His proposed solutions echoed the prevailing political 'solutions' to such systemic problems, a simplistic redistribution of goods that only

entrenched the deficit model of rural schooling (Cuervo, 2016). More funding in order to access the 'preferable' urban opportunities had problematic consequences for rural schools. These political solutions:

> inadvertently create an export model of education in rural contexts. There is a hidden consequence… the flow of resources *in* to rural schools occurs to help give rural students the mobility *out* of their communities through tertiary education and work in metropolitan and regional centers. (emphasis in the original, Cuervo, 2016, p. 195)

Many of the examples of activities that Maxwell wanted further subsidies for – Melbourne Work Experience Camp or the VET bus – contributed to the paradox of additional funding for rural schools. Part of the Melbourne camp's purpose was to expose and inspire students to career pathways that were not likely to be available in Greenfield and, given the shrinking population, the trades students were preparing for through VET might not be available locally in the future either. While Maxwell called for subsidies for student travel, he also identified that while extra funds were helpful to families' finances, this did not alleviate the additional stresses on teenagers that traveled for extended periods of time.

Maxwell also discussed a number of problems that resulted from inequality of opportunities. These included obstacles in accessing professional learning opportunities and to exposing his students to a wide variety of pathways options. Cuervo (2016) articulated equality of opportunity as a significant element of Australia's current hegemonic conceptualisation of equality. He highlighted the notion of equality when considering rural education because in the current discourses about Australian education issues, 'equality' was "usually used as a proxy definition of social justice due to its accessible meaning" (p. 88). So, the prominence of issues in accessing equal opportunities in Maxwell's narrative was not surprising given the centrality of the concept in Australian education discourse. One example of the inequalities of opportunities that Maxwell discussed related to his concerns about the effects of the inequality of opportunity to attend adequate, appropriate professional learning since many of the local pathways advisors did not hold qualifications. Patton (2001) highlighted that while careers educators came from a variety of backgrounds, they might not have any explicit careers' training. The variety of backgrounds and life experiences might have positive effects on the breadth and types of advice advisors could offer, but a lack of formal qualification might have a negative effect on the craft of advising. Maxwell's support of the Network was reflective of some of what the Country Education Project (2010) identified to be the more successful and valued types of professional

learning: local and collaborative with Jenkins, Reitano, and Taylor (2011) also stressing that "professional leaning… should promote re-contextualised pedagogies that are sensitive" (p. 80-81) to local areas. Maxwell claimed the Network was a way for pathways advisors to collaborate and share localised knowledge; but also expressed his deep concern for the future of the Network and Expo. There were fewer participants meaning more responsibilities fell on fewer shoulders, thereby making it less attractive for a new person to volunteer to take on additional responsibilities. He presented the current predicament of the Network and Expo as unsustainable while both gain importance as a means to access opportunities to pathways advisors, their students, and the region as a whole.

4.3.2.2. Recognitional justice: Promoting rural life and pathways advising.

In his narrative, Maxwell identified the need for greater understanding of rural communities and the work of pathways advisors. The educators in Cuervo's (2016) study also called for a greater recognition of their work by the community and policymakers. "The recognitional dimension of social justice emphasizes the need for recognition of different cultures and values… [and] has been understood as a critical component of… identity" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 91). Throughout his narrative, Maxwell presented as a passionate, invested rural resident and pathways advisor. His awareness of the misrecognitions of both rurality and advising seemed to drive much of his work.

The data suggested that Maxwell was working to improve the external misconceptions about rural life and the variety of opportunities available outside of the city, thereby improving elements of recognitional justice for the region. This work, particularly through the Careers Expo, highlighted the unique characteristics of the region and presented positive local options. His stated core beliefs about the nature of public education and his frustrations with metrocentric decision-makers suggested that he was working to promote both opportunities for students to stay local or to leave. By encouraging students to fully explore their options, and being supportive if they decided to stay or leave, he played an important role in mediating the potentially negative impacts of the rural brain-drain. Corbett (2010) built on his seminal *Learning to Leave* (2007), summarising the problem as:

> The problem of youth outmigration and brain drain is juxtaposed in tension with the concern for those children who do not leave, generating a kind of Catch-22 for

> communities that ironically find themselves celebrating the loss of human resources to cities and large towns (p. 227).

As a pathways advisor as well as the Expo's chairperson, Maxwell placed himself at the centre of this juxtaposition; he recognised that the advice he provided about potential opportunities in leaving or staying, played a vital role for the community's and region's sustainability. In order to do this well, he needed to have a strong understanding of the rural social space, something Maxwell stated repeatedly through his instance on the importance of advisors having local knowledge. Through his promotion of local pathways, Maxwell celebrated the local culture and values "which form the core of their dignity, self-esteem, and self-respect" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 91). It was the benefits and potential of this local culture that was being misrecognised and so perpetuated the oppression imposed by metro-normative expectations.

In addition to the work Maxwell did to promote local career options to students and their families, he also described ways in which he worked to address the misunderstanding of pathways advising. He reported the misrecognition of the role of careers education and pathways advising could have a harmful effect on his students and impacted on his ability to perform his role, particularly when principals did not understand. Misrecognising a social group could lead to inappropriate distribution of resources. Cuervo (2016) identified misrecognition as a significant shortfall of the existing distributive remedies to injustices facing rural schools. The current approaches to promote equality in rural schools are largely based on redistribution of resources, however, these distributions often do not consider the underlying systemic causes of the injustice (Cuervo, 2016). This could be seen in a microcosm with Maxwell and his principal. In Maxwell's narrative, the principal did not seem to understand the nature or scope of the work Maxwell did, so Maxwell did not receive adequate resources, namely adequate time to perform his role effectively. For example, while Maxwell could see the benefit and necessity of taking time to cultivate relationships with local employers, his principal did not. Maxwell saw this lack of recognition as a serious impediment to his work – both in his school and for the Expo – and something that needed to be addressed quickly. However, the widespread lack of understanding of the nature of careers education and the work of advisors is likely to continue so long as there is lack of consensus over what it should be by those within the profession (Douglas, 2010). Accounting for the heterogeneity of a social group – in this case the various roles, responsibilities, and expectations amongst rural pathways advisors – requires recognition that includes "the necessity to celebrate and stimulate difference with a community" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 97). So, it is not to assert that all pathways advisors need uniform roles, but rather there needs

to be a recognition of the type of work they do that is contextualised to their unique rural social space. Maxwell seemed to suggest some of this misrecognition of pathways advising was due to poor communication. His call for better communication could lead to improved recognitional justice for pathways advisors, but required the others to listen.

4.3.2.3. Associational justice: The need for advocacy while being ignored.

Throughout his narrative, Maxwell detailed the work he did that promotes a rural lifestyle and pathways options. By promoting and celebrating these options, he was also increasing the associational justice for his students and community. Roberts (2014) called for rural voices to speak against the prevailing deficit discourse surrounding rural education in Australia and to embrace the individuality of each rural community. This was something Maxwell did most explicitly through his external leadership roles in the Network and the Careers Expo. However, there was a sense of hopelessness in Maxwell's attempts to use his voice to speak up for the rural. He expressed concerns that those in charge are not listening. Cuervo (2016) warns that when voices from marginalised groups are taken as "tokenistic expressions… [they] serve to legitimize policies constructed from the viewpoint of dominant groups" (p. 104) and do not address the underlying problems. In this case, if rural educators spoke up for policies that would better serve their contexts and policymakers did not listen, it further oppressed the norms and values of rural communities, continuing the deficit thinking about rural education. Maxwell's narrative suggested that he did not have much hope of being anything more than a "tokenistic expression" to policymakers, even when consultation was deliberately sought. He had already concluded that the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry would not lead to any meaningful change, yet he still penned a submission on behalf of the Network.

Finally, he also expressed worry about the long-term health of the Network, which served as a vehicle for local pathways advisors' voices. If fewer members continued to attend meetings, the volume of their collective voice might be diminished. He valued those meetings as an opportunity not just to learn from one another, but to act as a collective and to have some level of participation in the decision-making process about their area of expertise. Participating in decision-making is a way to address "issues of counter-hegemony in the sense that allowing for meaningful participation disarticulates dominant discourses and opens the door to different voices" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 101). In other words, there is a need for rural educators and rural people to participate in decisions made about their lives if there is to be any meaningful

improvement. While Maxwell was doubtful about the effectiveness of speaking to policymakers to change the discourse, he framed the Expo as one of the mechanisms the Network used to speak up for rural pathways. The Expo was a showcase for local employment and was open to members of the public, not just students. Just as importantly, it was held locally making it more accessible to the various communities and dew outside employers and tertiary institutions to the region, highlighting to them what the region had to offer.

4.4. Summary

Maxwell repeatedly stressed the importance for pathways advisors to know their rural social space in order to do their job well and as necessary to promote increased social justice. His narrative included examples of this importance through how he understood the local agriculture work, responded to the shifting demographics of Greenfield, and the whole-of-community approach to exposing students the viability of locally available jobs. Maxwell's work often positioned him as an advocate for rural students through his role at school and his leadership in the Network and Careers Expo. Maxwell recognised he was in a position to have significant influence in his local and regional community through his work as a pathways advisor and his external leadership roles. Through this work, he attempted to address inadequacies of distributive justice, such as the lack of resources and the need to increase opportunities for his students. Maxwell's narrative included a number of instances where improved recognitional justice would benefit rural communities and pathways advisors. However, he did express concerns about the continued improvements to associational justice through his discussion of the tokenistic consultation of policymakers with rural pathways advisors and of the future of the Network. His concerns about the Network highlighted its importance to improving the practice of rural pathways advising and its potential to mediate issues of social justice.

Chapter Five: Emily: A Cog in the Community

For me, it was important that every single student who sat across from me knew there was someone on their side who would listen to what they really, really wanted and would help them try to find out how to get there… Because sometimes it may not be the teachers, it may not be the parents, but at least they know they've got someone try[ing] to guide them in as a realistic way as possible. So, I find that [it's] a really humbling job because you're kind of such an important… part of somebody else's future. That is huge!

5.1. Part One: Being a Careers Advisor

Emily approached her job as Deerfield College's career advisor with a positive outlook. *I see this as a helper role and that's why I wanted to do it… to show them as much experience and opportunity that's out there and guide them with that, rather than just letting them choose exactly what they want.* In her role, she combatted an underlying misunderstanding of careers advising; kept herself up-to-date on an ever-expanding set of policies, laws, courses, and local and global work trends; and nurtured relationships with students, parents, community members, employers in town, and in the region, and tertiary institutions in two states.

5.1.1. A lack of understanding: No such thing as a career advisor.

Emily reported that many people did not understand what her job entailed. She noted there was a lack of consistency in expectations and programs from school to school, as well as from one advisor to the next within a school. *It is a very challenging role and it's probably not given as much prestige or something, as the importance of actually what it is.* While Emily considered most teachers were supportive, those who were not made her job more difficult as she needed to work around their demands within her 0.2 time fraction. The under-appreciation manifested itself physically in her office; it was also used as storage space for classroom materials and included a half-wall separating it from a maintenance room.

5.1.2. Preparation and professional learning.

Emily was not a qualified careers advisor. Her school did not require the qualification when they hired her. She framed her rural upbringing and subsequent work history as the starting point for her to relate to her students and as a demonstration of the breadth of possibilities for them. Emily did not think her work would be enhanced if she undertook formal external professional learning. Instead, she discussed the importance of growing into the job and developing the necessary local relationships and contacts. However, Emily reported seeing an immediate improvement in her work due to the social science degree she was studying. This influenced her outlook on the contextual needs of her community and served as another example for her students.

Despite this lack of understanding and respect being problematic, Emily was wary that any attempt to create guidelines for careers advising would potentially disadvantage smaller rural schools. She assumed the guidelines would be designed by metropolitan policy makers and therefore be difficult to adapt to the particularities of rural communities. Emily pointed out that the careers advisors she knew came from a wide variety of backgrounds which influenced the way they approached their work. She recommended that careers advisors *need people who are able to make it their own, what the school needs you to be.* Instead of rigid guidelines being enforced, she wanted to see more support for advisors in the form of a regional contact person from the DET and the ability to shadow other advisors in other schools, perhaps even a mentoring system.

5.1.2.1. Role of the Network.

Emily's main source of external professional learning was the local careers Network. It was where she learnt about the *important stuff… [and where] we organise the Expo*. Attending meetings was one of the methods she used to keep up-to-date on the rapidly changing and expanding information necessary for her job. She favoured this type of external professional learning since it consisted of people working in similar contexts. Through it, she built relationships and contacts with other careers advisors and gained knowledge about employment opportunities that were local to the region.

Emily considered the Network to act as a safety net since she perceived little guidance or support from the DET. Especially when she was a new career advisor, having that *meeting that*

was a godsend, to be able to sit with people who have been doing, and quite a few had been doing the job a really long time … to be able to… pick their brains. Through the meetings, she was able to gain a better sense of if she was meeting the minimum requirements for her school and students. This included learning about changing regulations and requirements, which often happen unexpectedly. Emily valued learning about them at the Network meetings because there was an immediate discussion and collective-problem solving session about how to apply an urban-designed policy to a rural context. She identified this ability to collaborate with other professionals with different perspectives as an invaluable aspect of the Network. Emily attended each meeting she could, despite being the furthest from Westfield and not working on meeting days. She was opposed to video conferencing the meetings because it limited the professional discussions.

5.1.3. Importance of relationships.

Emily considered having a strong network of relationships a vital part of her job. With each year of experience, she had been able to further refine and tailor her advising based on her accumulated knowledge of the community. She saw herself to be *kind of lucky in that I'm not micromanaged*. This allowed her to prioritise the resources and opportunities that were most likely to benefit her students and community. Emily recognised that she not only needed to be the filter for such information into the school, but then relied on her relationships with the students, families, and community to effectively enact and communicate them.

5.1.3.1. Student relationships.

At the core of Emily's approach to her job were the relationships she was able to form with the students. She gathered information from a variety of sources – living and being active in the small community, communication with other teachers especially the welfare person, and conversations with students themselves. In order to *bring it [advising] down to each individual student, where are they coming from and… [their] feelings about school or careers,* she had to have positive relationships with students. Emily expressed a belief that being an education support staff member rather than a teacher allowed her to develop more trusting relationships with students as she did not have discipline-related responsibilities. She tried to work closely with the welfare staff member so they could keep certain students on the radar. Emily pointed

out that these students were usually enrolled in the VCAL program and she was concerned that, at the time of our interview, there was no VCAL teacher for the next school year.

5.1.3.2. Parent relationships.

Another major influence on Emily's job were the students' parents. She recognised they were a significant influence on their child's career planning, but they were unsure of the breadth of opportunities or the processes involved in reaching such goals. Emily also found that they could be left out of the planning conversations entirely. Emily said most of her work with parents happened outside of school hours and informally around town, building these relationships and credibility over time and through community involvement. Additionally, *anything that goes home to them always has my personal details and stuff and then they will make an appointment and come in. But a lot of my stuff is done at IGA [grocery store], or the Post Office or just randomly in the street or at the hairdressers.* While Emily viewed this as a way to help students develop their pathways and build her credibility with parents, she reported mixed feelings about giving out her personal details. She kept in contact with families through updates in the school newsletter and through writing letters to each Year 12's family at the beginning and toward the end of the year. She used those letters as a way to open the line of communication with details of what the student planned to do post-school as well as the steps needed to achieve the goal. Occasionally, she found that she knew more about the student's plan than the parent and they were grateful to be brought into the loop.

Another reason why Emily considered it important to engage with the parents of her students was because they tended to need to update their knowledge about career planning and work futures. She had found that many of them had outdated expectations of work, such as possible careers or necessary qualifications. In order for her advice to students to be effective, she felt their parents also needed to have a good understanding of pathways and work trends. *The fact that the level of experience, because most of them come from generational farming background, these parents typically have not had a tertiary education, may not have even lived away from a rural area. They're coming from spheres of influence that don't involve universities, that may not involve jobs that you need a lot of academic qualifications to do... Sometimes it can be a bit of a hard slog when you're trying to support students as well as parents to encourage them to have every opportunity, to try different things and new experiences - just to even see if there's an option, because they're coming from such a limited small*

background. Emily expressed concerns about the gendered and traditional expectations placed on students by their parents – girls as nurses or teachers and boys as accountants or farmers – as well as parents not understanding that their children were likely to have multiple jobs across their lifetimes. She had received negative comments from parents regarding her own work history and wanted to prevent her students from experiencing such comments. One example of this was a farmer suggesting she was unable to hold down a steady job or stick to anything for very long, which she reframed as having taken up a variety of opportunities for different types of experiences. Emily attributed his attitude to a *generational difference* in how work was approached, so she used her history as part of an explanation about the likelihood of students undertaking multiple jobs across their lifetimes.

Additionally, she hoped that by better educating families about the importance of exposure to new opportunities, she would encourage them to take their students to opportunities that the school could not such as university Open Days. These Open Days were a chance for families and prospective students to visit universities to explore campus, discover the various programs and courses on offer, and look at accommodation options in order to assist them in making an informed decision about applying. Emily considered there to be a number of *stumbling block[s]* to attending Open Days, namely the distance from campuses, which was made more inconvenient by inadequate public transportation. She also said there was too much to do in one day between the travel, activities, and visiting residences. Emily pointed out that an overnight required more time and money, two things families struggled with. The time of year and requirements of the farm also made attending Open Days difficult for a number of local families.

5.1.3.3. Community relationships.

Emily had built up her understanding of the community's employment needs through her ongoing engagement in the community. *We rely on relationships here. It's all about the relationship.* Deerfield was a small town and she was of the opinion that most businesses understood the need to participate in Work Experience for the future of the town and their business. Emily contended that Work Experience could lead students to ongoing employment once they had finished school, which tended to be particularly good for VCAL students. Emily noted that students and their relationships in the community played a big part in securing Work Experience placements as well.

However, in this system that was built on trust and relationships, if something went wrong, there could be long term consequences. Emily worried about the occasional difficult student who might turn a business off participating in the future. The local Work Experience program was underpinned by a series of favours, making it especially fragile if a student turned out to have not been a good fit. *We do rely on the locals. It is… that village bringing up a child.* Another concern was that employers did not understand exactly what Work Experience was before they agreed to take on students. Keeping businesses engaged with the program was a priority with limited opportunities exacerbated by businesses who did not participate. Emily found it particularly problematic that both of Deerfield's mechanics would not take on students. As a result, she had developed further relationships with the local outposts of big agri-businesses so that students could gain related experience.

5.2. Obstacles to Opportunities

Emily wanted to help students and their parents see the wider world outside of Deerfield because she wanted to be *sure that all of our kids have as much of an equal opportunity as possible*. She worried that the relatively traditional and static community of Deerfield was limiting students' ambitions. Emily tried to strike a balance between encouraging students to leave and supporting those who wanted to stay. She was of the opinion that students needed to leave for new experiences and new ways of thinking in order to bring the best ones back home.

Part of the difficulty Emily found in getting students to consider their work futures, was getting them to think beyond what they saw in their daily lives. Emily acknowledged the problematic roles television and the internet played in shaping student aspiration. She used brochures from tertiary institutions about their various courses, industry-produced pamphlets about possible career options, and various education support services offered by different providers; hundreds were sent to the school each year. Emily found these handouts tended to focus students and their parents on possibilities, seeing them as a tangible and reliable way to start students and, just as importantly, their families, on a deeper exploration of a tertiary course or career field.

5.2.1. Preparing for emerging careers.

Emily tried to balance exposing students to existing and emerging careers, focusing on both local employment needs and those further afield. She described talking through the possibilities of cutting-edge technologies – like Artificial Intelligence and genetics research – with students to spark their imaginations. In those future-orientated discussions, she mentioned jobs like mining on Mars as well as using drones in agriculture. Emily tried to get students to consider *how can we bring it back here? How can we use it [technology] and what sort of skills can you use to do that?* She also encouraged students who wanted to remain on the family farm to participate in TAFE to improve their business skills.

5.2.2. Accessing opportunities beyond the local community.

Emily identified several persistent issues with exposing students to opportunities, beyond the lack of available funding. Due to the lack of public transport, it was difficult to get students to physical opportunities. Despite being in Victoria, it was easier to access opportunities across the state border in South Australia. When students were on camp in South Australia's capital city Adelaide, they also visited university residences and campuses, something Emily credited with changing some students' minds about attending. Emily brought students to the local Careers Expo and to one in South Australia that catered specifically to local, agricultural jobs.

There were also difficulties accessing opportunities at school. Emily was concerned about the difficulty Deerfield had in recruiting and retaining specialist teachers, specifically science and music, and the effects of not exposing students to such subjects. The students benefited from participating in an outreach program from a regional university, but Emily had concerns about the funding and support of regional universities on a systemic level despite their importance to regional/rural communities. Additionally, she identified difficulty engaging with online opportunities. While she acknowledged there were a growing number of opportunities online, they were not equivalent to the face-to-face option, since *it doesn't add that extra element of networking, critical thinking, discussion.* She also wanted groups like the CEAV to provide more content online, such as webinars, but there was the underlying problem of poor internet and IT infrastructure with many students unable to access online resources from home.

5.2.3. Work Experience program.

Emily identified Work Experience as a significant opportunity for students. Coordinating this program was helped and hindered by being in a small community. On the one hand, their size allowed for flexibility, strong relationships, and generally positive engagement with local businesses; but on the other hand, there were a limited number and type of local businesses, some did not get involved, and employers could be influenced by the local rumour mill– for example if an employer had heard negative things about a student around town then they may be reluctant to take them on.

Emily explained that while there were designated weeks for Work Experience, the school was able to be flexible in order to accommodate student interests and local business needs. For example, there might have been more students interested in a certain workplace than that employer could take on at once. As a result, the school allowed students to stagger their placements across various weeks of the school year. She also detailed that the hands-off policy in the Work Experience program, designed to protect employers, students, and clients, is unrealistic in many rural professions, so the school made practical adjustments. In particular, Emily was frustrated with the restrictions Occupational Health and Safety regulations placed on agriculture-related student Work Experience; the potential dangers of working with farm equipment created such a legal liability that it was not allowed during Work Experience. With students doing the same work at home on their family farms for years, she explained this led to an annoyance when they were not allowed to the same tasks on another farm during school hours. She worried that the regulations would not be followed, which prompted the school to think creatively about how to assist their students to gain relevant experience. *What we actually do is get them to sign off that they are not at Work Experience. Their parents sign off that they are at 'So And So's farm'… It is no use saying, 'Oh I want to go and do Work Experience on a farm in November,' because basically you are standing there waving at the header.* So, to keep the school out of trouble and to give students the opportunity to participate meaningfully in farm work, they reported the student as being employed for the week rather than participating in Work Experience.

5.2.4. Rural community sustainability.

Emily expressed a number of strengths and concerns about the future of her community. Her awareness of the challenges facing her community shaped the way she approached her work and the advice she gave students. Emily repeatedly identified lack of public transport and poor IT infrastructure as restrictive on her students and their futures. *We need people, educated people in these rural areas, who can actually stand up and say, 'hey, this isn't working for us. Remember us. We've got great kids and we've got great schools and great parents and we want to make a contribution.'* She recognised the need for a balance between students staying and going. Additionally, she thought there should be a greater focus on going and coming back, as well as attracting metropolitan youth. This meant ensuring students considered *living in a smaller community as an amazing opportunity… to give them a reason to come back and to give them a reason to think that they can live here being fulfilled.* Her suggestions for making a return more attractive included the promotion of rural towns as a place to start a business due to the lower costs of operations, the development of more partnerships with philanthropic groups and universities, and an increase in tourism opportunities.

Emily highlighted the known and cyclical problem of rural communities needing more – people, infrastructure – and not getting it. Emily gave an example that demonstrated how trying to address the population problem could make things worse without the proper support structures in place. Someone might move to town *and quite often they come in with their husband or partner or wife, who may also be tertiary educated… [but] they can't step up and make something of themselves because we don't have the support system to get that going. And if you've got one partner who's not happy, it's not going to last. So, we don't get to… keep that whole family here…. We need to look at that… support system as well because it does everyone good when we've got people out with the new ideas and new way of thinking and they've come from different jobs and different backgrounds… all the shires are losing people outward. We need to be starting to think about bringing them in because it's only going to help those who are already here as well.* Emily drew connections between the variety of locally available jobs to the breadth of student aspirations and the likelihood of outmigration. She framed these problems as an element of her job – to help students see the positives and possibilities of staying local.

5.3. Part Two: Discussion

Emily positioned herself and her job as being a cog in the community. This situated her in the middle of the community with the potential to influence the future, not just of her students, but of Deerfield itself. Of note, she did not use *cog* in a negative, impassive sense – such as just being a cog in a machine – rather she used it in a more positive, active sense. She used this metaphor to help describe how, since she had grown up in a rural area then worked in urban areas and in rural community-building jobs, she was able to act as a conduit between Deerfield and the imagined futurist world of work elsewhere.

5.3.1. Rural social space.

The way Emily framed and approached her job necessitated a strong understanding of her rural social space. She explicitly stated that she considered her life experiences as adequate preparation for her job and considered the formal, external qualification to be a careers advisor unbeneficial. Emily's desire to have more time with Network members to work together and to shadow each other seemed to be practical suggestions to improving the quality of local, rural pathways advising. This echoed Jenkins, Reitano, and Taylor's (2011) recommendation that professional learning that occurred in the rural context of the teachers, such as action research, was far more effective than a program that assumed rural and urban teachers had the same needs. The epitome of contextualised professional learning could be seen in Emily's involvement and interactions with her community; this allowed her to determine the specific needs of the community as well as identify topics she needed to upskill herself on. She asserted that her ability to do her job well, to be effective, was improved each year through developing relationships and trial and error in how to best use the resources allocated to her. Her focus on localised knowledge complemented her focus on the need to think creatively and to be proactive to ensure the sustainability of the community. This place-conscious model, where the school responded and interacted with the community to meet its specific needs, was in line with Green's (2015) call to reconceptualise education as a way to promote rural-regional sustainability. He argued that "thinking beyond the school is crucial… schools are embedded in communities, and potentially integrated with them, as multi-scalar sites of communication and learning, being and becoming" (Green, 2015, p. 45). He posited that multiple facets of the community needed to collaborate for this be accomplished since they all shared the same rural social space. Emily

enacted this through her role as a cog in the community. She created and valued those partnerships.

5.3.1.1. Parent knowledge and involvement with career pathways.

One of the main challenges Emily identified was how to update parents' understanding of careers and pathways. She spoke of their isolation in terms of tertiary study and current/ future work trends and requirements. Emily had also identified that while she worked with students and exposed them to new pathways and opportunities, they went home to families that had not been exposed to them. This was consonant with Cuervo, Chesters, and Aberdeen's (2019) finding that there was "a strong association between parental education, parental employment and parental occupation and levels of social and cultural capital" (p. 14) which were key elements shaping student aspirations. A particular concern of Emily's were the gendered and traditional aspects of career planning parents seemed to take with their children. She expressed concern about parents steering their children toward stereotypical jobs – women as teachers or nurses – but she did not mention gendered aspects of career aspiration expressed by students. Her concern seemed to align with Cuervo et al.'s (2019) finding that in regional Australia females were more likely to aim for professional careers requiring university qualifications while males were more likely to want to pursue vocational pathways.

Importantly, Emily did not hold the parents at fault for their outdated knowledge, even though she had encountered some resistance. Instead, she saw it as a result of the rapidly changing world of work and legislation. Rather than continue to work in opposition to their views, Emily had made it part of her job to include educating parents. She did this through multiple lines of communication: school newsletter, letters home, meetings in and out of school times, and being an active and visible member of the community. The problems with accessing and updating parent pathways information mirrored Tieken's (2016) findings that multiple lines of communication with parents, especially those whose children might be a first-generation university students, were important since they could feel overwhelmed at what the processes were. Tieken also found that while most parents were supportive of tertiary studies, there remained a group, usually composed of lower SES families, that was not and who remained linked to a "'rural culture' … [with] a lingering dependence on rural industries" (2016, p. 216) where further education was unnecessary. This was most prevalent in areas where most local jobs did not require higher qualifications, which was the case in Deerfield.

5.3.1.2. Credibility in the community.

This ongoing communication with parents was one of the ways Emily identified as to how she built her standing in the community. She viewed her credibility as a way to strengthen the relationships and the trust placed in her. For her, this was an important aspect of her job and one she recognised as a privilege. Her advice played a role in significant decisions around the students' future. Students and parents needed to trust she had their best interests at heart. This trust was built up over time and her efforts to get to know each student and their families in and out of school. Emily's interpretation of trust echoed Falk and Kilpatrick's (2000) assertion that trust is situated in specific socio-cultural contexts and "the fundamental nature and role of trust [is] in building social capital" (p. 104). This trust, and the resulting social capital, were vital elements to Emily's pathways advising. They shaped her work with community members and were influential in the relationships she relied on for Work Experience with the local employers. The employers took a risk to their productivity when they accepted a student, especially if the student was problematic, and Emily took a risk to her reputation and future availability of the work site. Another element that bolstered the relationships and trust was Emily's status as an education support staff member. She credited this as a vital element since her job did not carry the negative elements of being a teacher, namely disciplinary actions. This was in-line with Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, and Gulemetova (2013) argument that education support professionals were more likely to have strong connections with students since they tended to come from the same communities. Emily identified that her rural upbringing facilitated her relatability with the community.

This credibility with the community was also a key element to the variety of partnerships Emily had with the local employers. She identified favours and personal connections in the community as lynch pins to the Work Experience program and described how they took considerable time to establish and maintain. In addition to the good will of employers, Emily hypothesised that businesses recognised the need to participate in student programs for their own future success. Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams and Jago (2017) found that industry representatives recognised the benefits of partnering with schools to engage students and tended to be willing to engage in a partnership. While their study considered formalised partnerships through a larger targeted project, Emily's narrative indicated that this was also the case with her informal partnerships.

5.3.1.3. Geographic obstacles to access.

In addition to discussing some of the small-town problems, Emily shared unique challenges that influenced her work stemming from being located furthest from Westfield. For one, she noted that she chose to attend Network meetings, a three-hour roundtrip in her own time, because she valued the face-to-face discussion more than the time required to travel. This was consistent with Glover et al.'s (2016) assertion that despite the barriers, rural teachers accessed roughly the same number of hours of professional development, preferring opportunities that allowed for interaction and collaboration. They also suggested that web-based access to professional development was not preferred, which Emily echoed in her opposition to video conferencing. While she had the means to overcome the challenges presented by travel, she considered it an obstacle for exposing students and their families to other opportunities.

Emily identified several other challenges stemming from the geographic location of Deerfield. These challenges were exemplified through her discussion about Open Days. Firstly, travel time, cost, and public transportation remained obstacles. Secondly, the timing of Open Days in August coincided with a critical time in the local farming calendar which meant many families cannot leave the farm during this season. Emily found this problematic because some of the farming families had students interested in leaving town for tertiary study and might be the first-in family to do so. Tieken (2016) argued that ensuring families could attend access campuses and speak to university staff were key factors in alleviating concerns about what university life was like and what to expect, was is particularly important to first-in family students. Tieken (2016) also stressed the importance of "direct contact with parents and families… [since it] fuels participants' perceptions of whether and how parents and communities support college aspirations" (p. 215). This was something Emily also recognised and was another reason why she tried to communicate with and involve parents more. A third factor complicating Open Day attendance was Deerfield's proximity to the South Australian border. This meant Emily, and also her students and families, needed to navigate two different university application systems. It was not possible to visit universities in Melbourne and Adelaide on the same weekend[11], necessitating further travel and expenses. These challenges amounted to significant issues of access and might limit student career pathways. Attending Open Days was

[11] Deerfield is located between the two cities, both of which are approximately 4-5 hours' drive away.

just one of the many issues of access to universities that affected Emily's work and her students, more of which will be discussed in Section 5.3.2.1.

5.3.1.4. Who leaves, stays, returns, or goes to Mars?

Throughout her narrative, Emily's discussion of the types of careers she advised her students on reflected an understanding of local employment opportunities as well as emerging global trends. She discussed the pathways for Leavers and Stayers (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014) in roughly equal measures, but framed the options in different language. Emily's recognition and encouragement for students to stay, leave, or return was a positive for her community which echoed Corbett's (2007) call for schools to support students in their exploration of all three options. Despite providing advice on a variety of options, Emily's language in discussing them might have unintended consequences. Sellars, Gale, and Parker (2011) explored the importance of students imagining future work pathways, especially for students who lacked lived experiences and Emily's narrative contained multiple examples of encouraging students to imagine their futures. The local jobs she assisted students with were familiar, but she also tried to inspire students to leave in preparation for jobs of the future or that broke the local gendered, traditional aspirations – for instance challenging the students to consider mining on Mars. However, Zipin et al. (2015) warn that attempts to raise power-marginalised – socially or geographically – student aspirations to imagined futures needed to be carefully considered and take into account the socio-cultural resources that had created the established aspirations. This is not to argue against the notion of raising aspirations, but rather there needs to be a realistic consideration of the entrenched obstacles facing power-marginalised youth. Zipin et al. (2015) postulated that addressing and valorising emergent aspirations could serve "as a locus of agency wherein young people have possibilities to exceed older generational inheritances, reading the world anew and – particularly if power-marginalized – wrestling anew with the cruel optimisms that history bequeaths to them" (p. 243). Emily also seemed to understand this – she encouraged her students to consider jobs they had not seen, but also recognised there were systemic obstacles that might prevent them from embracing those possibilities.

While Emily might have been sparking creativity and broadening the possibilities which might have encouraged some students to leave, it was worth considering how this framing affected other students. There remained a need for traditional jobs locally, including some that

required outside study, such as teacher. Corbett and Forsey (2017) teased out the stereotypes of rural workers that were typically presented – the immobile working class local, the migrant worker, and the future-orientated technologically trained knowledge-worker – and noted that these figures did not necessarily match local labour markets. Emily's framing of the possibilities of work for the future-orientated technological knowledge-worker might be overselling the realistic possibilities in a way that was similar to her concerns at the influence television has had on student aspirations. My consideration of her language use and framing of professions is in no way meant to deride or limit the aspirations of rural students, but rather is a contemplation in the vein of Zipin and colleagues (2015) of the socio-cultural resources behind current aspirations and the balance needed between possible, creative jobs and tangible, visible jobs. The resources required to inspire and inform students about possible future jobs were some of the most difficult to access while the resources to inspire and inform students about local trades were easier. Emily reinforced the variety of local pathway options through the Work Experience program and by also taking students to a South Australian rural careers expo because it targets agriculture careers. These issues of access to resources, opportunities, and types of capital which were present in Deerfield and shaped Emily's role, were also issues of social injustice.

5.3.2. Social justice.

Emily's discussion of her work raised several issues of social justice. She identified a core tenant of her work was pushing students to experience more opportunities than what they saw in Deerfield, explicitly using the phrase *equality of opportunity* when describing her efforts. In terms of recognitional justice, Emily highlighted issues that arose from a lack of understanding pathways advising as well as the benefits of a rural lifestyle. When she considered how these various injustices may be alleviated, her suggestions would result in an increase in associational justice.

5.3.2.1. Distributive justice: Unequal opportunities to visit universities.

Emily's discussion revealed a number of issues related to distributive justice. These mainly centred on ensuring her students overcame what she considered to be a disadvantage in terms of equality of opportunity. She positioned herself as a conduit between the community and the wider world. Emily had had experiences 'out there,' but her own rural upbringing

assisted her to 'interpret' the options and possibilities to something that was understandable to her community. Emily listed several specific concerns such as difficulties recruiting and retaining specialist teachers, infrastructure problems with accessing the limited online resources for students and herself, and detailed the importance of regional universities to rural areas. These isolating issues are widely cited in academic literature as problematic for aspirations and tertiary participation (for example, Fleming & Grace, 2017). Fleming and Grace (2017) found that rural students who engaged with university campuses – such as the experience camp in their study – reported great confidence in their ability to move away from home and a greater understanding of university. They posited "the increased confidence reported by these students (both in their ability to move away from home and their decision-making skills) may play a crucial role when they are faced with the actual decision to leave home and attend university" (p. 359). Emily had also recognised the importance of getting students access to campuses in order to help them clarify their decision-making around their future career paths. She tried to use the limited school resources to do so when possible. Emily also identified families as a key to exposing students to more opportunities and assisting their children to see them as achievable or necessary. This was partly why she was shifting her focus to educating parents about pathways and was concerned about the obstacles surrounding Open Days. Emily's views on involving families in these decisions reflected Tieken's (2016) findings regarding the importance of educating families – especially whose students would be first-in-family to attend university – and including them in activities such as campus visits.

5.3.2.2. Recognitional justice: Multifaceted lacks of understanding.

Emily's narrative revealed two major concerns in the area of recognitional justice, which she perceived as a lack of prestige for the role. The first was around the damage caused by the principal's lack of understanding about pathways advising. This could be seen as an example of Fraser's (1997) proposal that "justice today requires both redistribution and recognition" (p. 32) and an examination of how social equality and cultural recognition can support each other rather than compete against each other. Fraser (1997) elaborated, "it also means theorizing the ways in which economic disadvantage and cultural disrespect are currently entwined with and support one another" (p. 32). In order for redistribution to be fair, there needs to be recognition of all stakeholders. While the need to reconsider how the disrespect and misrecognition of pathways advising was a systemic issue, the situation at Deerfield College served as a microcosm. Emily's

principal did not seem to understand the type and extent of the work done by pathways advisors and so did not allocate enough resources for Emily to perform her job as she understood it.

The second is the frustration Emily expressed when rural communities were framed as being in deficit to the urban. This misrecognition of rural being considered in opposition to urban areas and the resulting shortcomings in policy and approaches to education informed Cuervo's (2016) adoption of a pluralistic form of social justice. Cuervo's (2016) call for an expanded sense of social justice in rural education was echoed by Green, who in much of his work, explores and reinforces the need for social justice in education to be more critically aware of space and place. In one example, Roberts and Green (2013) argued that for much of Australian history the rural had been depicted either as a lush idyll or a place of isolation to be feared and "as a result of this national imagery, the rural has been socially constructed as backward, both of the past and valuing old ways, difficult, and in need of 'rescuing'" (p. 766). Throughout Emily's narrative, she pushed back against the negative stereotypes of rural life and bleak future through a strong passion for her community and encouraging students to consider career paths of Staying, Leaving, and Returning. However, she saw the need for more assistance before rural communities could better help themselves, mainly through an increased investment in infrastructure. This sense of injustice – where "geographically blind" (Green & Letts, 2007, p. 61) education policies did not recognise the strengths and benefits of rural places, never mind the differences between rural places – shaped her work by affecting the way she framed different types of careers and possibilities. One example of this was how she tried to remind students who felt they had to leave for tertiary studies to return to rural areas, bringing their new ideas and new professions with them. To do this, she saw a need to promote the lifestyle that could be experienced in rural areas.

5.3.2.3. Associational justice: Necessity of the Network.

Emily's solutions to easing some of these challenges were through a stronger focus on associational justice. The proposed solutions in her narrative echoed the findings of Cuervo's (2016) study with rural Victorian teachers. He identified that "teachers offered a more plural view of social justice, mostly based on a need for more participation in decisions that affected their work" (p. 133) as well as a need for greater recognition and empowerment within their work. Emily's discussion of what she considered to be the function of the Network – an opportunity to speak up and for themselves and a way to shape their work to suit their local

contexts – framed it as a vehicle for potentially improving their associational justice. Importantly, while she had identified the benefits of participating in the Network, she also called for greater support in order to access meetings. In particular, she pointed out that geographic location and insufficient time provided by schools were obstacles individual pathways advisors needed to navigate.

Of note is Emily's identification of the Network as an opportunity to work through and interpret various policies and requirements in an appropriate way for their region. Due to rural pathways advisors not having a larger voice in decisions affecting their work – a necessary condition of associational justice as described by Cuervo (2016) – there was a need for them to mediate the implementation many policies. One such policy identified by Emily were the OH&S restrictions placed on agriculture-based Work Experience. In her opinion, they undercut the usefulness of Work Experience in these careers for students and jeopardised the relationships with local farmers. Emily's expression of scepticism concerning the DET becoming more prescriptive about careers education was also a reflection of the lack of participation or being taken as "tokenistic expressions" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 104) during consultations. Her concerns over the content of her program being dictated by an outside authority – without suitable consultation with rural pathways advisors – echoed the concerns Roberts (2017) found rural teachers had about the relationship between the national curriculum and their community context. He "implore[d] policy makers, curriculum writers and those implementing the curriculum in their schools to consider the relationship between what is valued in official documents and the interests of the communities they serve" (p. 57). This went to the heart of Emily's concerns about metrocentric policy makers forcing guidelines or careers education curriculum onto schools with no consideration of their unique rural social space or developed without input from rural pathways advisors.[12]

[12] Since the time of this interview and as a result of the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools, the government has introduced new requirements on careers education in schools with the aim of improving careers education, but that reflects very little consideration for the challenges facing rural schools already and the additional challenges presented by implementing the new requirements.

5.4. Summary

Throughout her narrative, Emily repeatedly stressed the importance of being active in her rural social space through the development and cultivation of local knowledge and partnerships in the community. For her, this knowledge and these partnerships were necessary to her advising role in order to provide appropriate advice and support for her students as well as the wider community. Emily also identified a number of obstacles she faced in her work as a result of social injustice such as difficulties accessing opportunities, poor recognition of her work, and the need for greater participation in decision-making. She highlighted the importance of the Network as a source of professional support and as a mechanism for addressing a number of the injustices she saw through her work. Emily's positioning of herself as being a cog in the community symbolised the larger implications of her role in the community – the advice she gave and her relationships to students, families, and employers – had the potential to affect the future of the town itself.

Chapter Six: Nancy: The Local Employment Consultant

Sometimes I feel like I'm an employment consultant because you go up the street and people know what you do and either they're looking for workers or they're looking to change their own job … ask for advice, so… [going] down to the supermarket's pretty hard to do sometimes… I do feel like an employment consultant because we don't have that facility here in Southwick. You… have to go down to Westfield to do that. They [the school] don't know. As I said, I can do pretty much what I want to do… and [being] involved in football, I've always got parents asking me about stuff. It might be just getting their Year Nine… a part-time job… or TFNs [tax file number] or scholarships for uni. Like, you don't realise how much information you have got up here that other people don't, that you can help them with.

6.1. Part One: Southwick College's Careers Advisor

Nancy was a qualified career advisor[13]. At the time of the study, she had worked for the College for seventeen years, first as a part-time science lab technician then as the career advisor for the past five years. She replaced the *long-serving careers teacher who had been here since I was a student*. While she was peripherally involved with the careers education delivered through Learning Pathways classes, she managed student transitions out of school, collated the required data for the Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS), prepared students for Work Experience, and was the Vocational Education Training (VET) coordinator. After she changed roles, the school required her to undertake a Certificate IV in Career Development. While she disliked the formal study required for the Certificate, she deeply appreciated attending other professional learning opportunities that were more suited to her day-to-day work. Nancy said she was able to attend the professional development opportunities she wanted because she was not a teacher and so did not need to be replaced by a casual relief teacher. Chief amongst these activities was the local careers Network. *You have to be part of that Network. That's where I learned how to do the job, what I had to do. My predecessor was very laid back and just had it*

[13] Nancy uses the term *career advisor* for herself and others, but occasionally will refer to others as *career teachers*.

all up here… I've just learned on the job really. Attending Network meetings allowed her to discuss her work with other advisors, which was something she wanted to do more. Aside from the Network, she identified the value of attending agriculture industry-related professional learning because *you have to be interested when you live in … this area* and many of her students were interested in those careers.

Nancy loved her job but disliked the paperwork. *I like helping the kids and because I've been brought up here, born and bred, went to this school, know the kids, know the families-parents are the employers up the street. I have a really good rapport. So, when you are getting kids jobs in this area, I find it really easy.* She also linked this rapport to having been an education support staff member rather than a teacher. The best part of her work was seeing students get a job, especially those who stayed local. For her, career advising was not about telling students what they should do, but rather providing the resources they needed to make their own informed decisions. While Nancy did not think her principal knew what she did, she enjoyed the professional freedom afforded by this.

6.1.1. Responsibilities.

Nancy had an increasing involvement with students as they progressed through their schooling. She did not know what happened in the careers-related classes aside from the three to four lessons a year when she assisted students to begin their career action plan (CAP), introduced them to an online career exploration resource, and took them on excursions to local businesses and the Careers Expo. She had access to the Year 10 and 11 students in their study halls where she needed them to continue their CAPs and the paperwork required for Work Experience, like earning their Safe at Work certificates. In Year 12, she had one-on-one interviews with each student to develop their post-school plans, including submitting preferences for tertiary study and/or writing resumes. Nancy explained that she had more contact with the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) students because they needed extra support in their VET studies and for their weekly Work Placements.[14] She wanted to make some improvements on this program *but it's very difficult to get time. You know the school has to do*

[14] Work Placements are undertaken by VET students as part of their VET studies. Work Experience is the opportunity for all students to try out a job. Nancy prefers the term Work Placement, perhaps because she spends more time on them than Work Experience, but she also uses the term to refer to Work Experience.

so much now, other stuff other than education, that it's… really difficult to get time for careers. In a revamped program, she would include more time for careers exploration.

Southwick College participated in the regional VET Cluster in order to offer their students a wider range of options. Nancy elaborated on how being the VET Coordinator could be challenging. It involved difficulties in monitoring students' attendance and academic progress as well as an internal application process. The VET bus trip was an hour into Westfield, which left students unsupervised from drop-off until their class began and from the end of class to pick-up (classes ended at different times). She used to have more difficulties keeping track of students' attendance because of poor communication between the VET teachers and individual schools; often problems were not identified for weeks. However, there were now twice daily attendance reports. Nancy had tightened the application process in order to ensure the student was the right fit to the course due to the size of the commitment and the considerable costs. Interested students must also have attended the Try-A-VET Day run by the Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and the College's VCE Information Night, each of which she coordinated.

VET coordination also included the worst part of Nancy's job. *I think in this day and age the paperwork is just is getting… more time consuming… for an example those Work Placement forms. I have to do another set of forms for more than 20 days in a placement. Now in a small town, all my kids don't swap.* She explained that the forms needed to be filled out again every 20 days, but acknowledged that she had a relatively small number of students.

6.1.2. Accessing the wider world of work.

Nancy identified a number of issues she encountered when she tried to expose students to the wider world of work. There were limited local options for incursions; she organised industry tours and had employers come to talk to students about agriculture-based careers. Each year the Army came to make their pitch as part of a region-wide tour after the Careers Expo. Additionally, she organised access to webinars from providers such as Learn, Experience, Access Professions (LEAP). However, *unless you physically drag them to a classroom and have someone standing in front, it's difficult for them to get engaged in wanting to learn about what's out there.*

The difficulties increased if Nancy wanted to take the students on an excursion. Distance and cost were fundamental issues she had to consider when exploring opportunities. *A lot of them [organisations] like the LEAP… bring it [an event] to the country, but they don't really. Bendigo is country to them. Well, that's still two and a half hours away for us. So, the transport costs are high to get the kids to go… And then paperwork involved to have an overnight camp… It's expensive and time consuming and it's easier not to go 'cause it comes to the crunch and the kids pull out because they've got after school jobs or you know they've got sport.* She recently had to cancel a planned excursion to a regional university's Year 10 Experience Day because students gave her excuses last-minute like not wanting to miss VCE classes.

Nancy did bring the students to the local Careers Expo every year. *I'd never take anyone back to Melbourne [expos]… it is a long day and it was big, but there was no more information there than there was at ours … I make it free. MIPs [Managed Individual Pathways] money covers the transport. So, I've just got to get that permission form off them!* However, she found that students did not always make the most of this opportunity. The predominant feedback she received from students was that there were not enough food vans, so they spent lots of time in line.

6.2. Connections to the Community

Nancy appreciated her strong connection to the community. She considered it important to be seen outside of school, especially by the students, as it assisted in building a strong rapport. *A lot of our teachers don't live here … they [students] never ever see them out in the community, involved in sport. I'm around and they see me and they can speak to me whenever they want.* She also believed that having a child in the school helped.

Nancy was active in the community, which she said raised her accessibility and built relationships. Her office at school was highly visible at the library entrance and in a separate building to the principal's office, allowing for easy access by community members. She had multiple stories of giving advice out of school hours. Previous students kept in touch and she assisted them with advice on changing courses at university or updating their CVs. Nancy attributed this to *just coming from a small town… I may not see them for three years, but they know where I am… I really enjoy that part of it.* She told a story about recently helping a student

with a career quiz after she received a text message during dinner. Several times, she mentioned being approached around town in her own time for advice about a parent's child or themselves. Nancy also identified the sidelines of the footy oval[15] as a place she frequently advised parents and coordinated with local business owners. Additionally, other teachers sent her referrals to employers.

While Nancy described mostly positive, mutually beneficial relationships with local employers, it was not always the case. She worried about students *that will promise you the earth, then give you nothing*. This would endanger one of the precious few local opportunities for a Work Placement. *We had one student that loved his VET… [he] got put on full time and stuffed it – family circumstances, bad choices. So, now that employer won't touch me. And he's a big employer in town. He owns three businesses… It's frustrating putting kids in jobs locally when I know the employers personally and they let them down.* She identified the guilt as a downside to relying on such close relationships, but also frustration when employers did not participate in Work Placement. Nancy expressed specific frustration with the local mechanics since they would not take female students for placements. She thought this perpetuated gender stereotypes and potentially negatively shaped students' aspirations.

6.3. Concerns about Disengagement

Nancy had recognised that the nature of her work had changed as the demographics of the town had changed, and she reported there were more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Nancy described a *huge shift probably in the last three years in extra stuff we offer for students who are disengaged* and how it had affected her role. There had been an increase in hand-on-learning which started in Year Eight and Nine in order to keep *them connected and maybe once a bit of maturity kicks in and they see what the real world is like, they might decide to come back and do a bit of learning… they hate school. So, we try and jolly them along by giving them something practical to do until they can get to VET.* The school began VCAL and VCE from Year 10. This allowed students to complete Units One and Two over two

[15] Sporting clubs are social hubs in rural Victorian communities. A large percentage of the population is likely to participate in, volunteer at, or spectate games of Australian Rules Football (footy), netball, and [field] hockey – depending on the sporting facilities available.

years[16], then Units Three and Four during Year 12. Nancy pointed out that extending what was traditionally Year 11 curriculum over two years should have allowed for more career education-related interruptions and excursions, but that teachers *do not agree.* The College offered a satellite VCAL program at the Neighbourhood House for some students *because they didn't like the school environment at all and they didn't like associating with anybody else.* However, Nancy noted that it was unsustainable and no longer ran despite the continued need. The College was preparing to offer a VET business course at the school to meet the needs of students who could not take the VET bus for financial reasons – such as their inability to cover the weekly transportation costs – or who were not mature enough to spend significant amounts of time either unsupervised in Westfield or behave appropriately in an adult-learning environment.

Nancy voiced concerns about what she considered to be an increasing lack of student engagement in planning their own futures. *The kids, once upon a time when I was young, we had time to think what we're going to do when we grow up because we had time.* She described talking about her aspirations during long car rides with her large family and how she thought many families did not do this anymore. As a response to students telling her they did not have the time to think about careers, she directed them to online resources like career quizzes to get them started, ideally before they needed to choose preferences for university at the end of Year 12. The student who messaged her for guidance during dinner joked that *I spend most of my time trying to avoid you because you always got the hard questions*. Nancy also pleaded with students to check the local newspaper for job advertisements.

Nancy identified a number of ways this disengagement affected students' responses to the programs she offered. She attributed the difficulties she had offering incursions and excursions, such as getting permission slips returned, to this. Nancy worried that if students did not properly consider what jobs they might like to have, then they would find themselves in an expensive VET course they were not interested in or a Work Placement that was not suitable. To begin to address the student apathy, Nancy stressed the need to tailor her approach to her audience.

In her work, Nancy described two types of parents – one group that was problematic in assisting students to realistic career paths and one group that was very supportive. *I think a lot of the time the parents have an outdated view of what jobs are now. And then the kids are*

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[16] In VCE, Unit 1 & 2 subjects are usually taken during Year 11 and Units3 & 4 are taken during Year 12.

influenced more by them than me… I can say that, as an example, you really do need to stay in school and have maths to do automotive. 'Naw, Dad didn't have maths. Why do I need maths?' The employers are asking for maths but the father doesn't know that, so he wants the kid to drop out in Year 10 and become a mechanic… the fact that the parents have an outdated view on what's required in a job today, that's a challenge and I don't know how we overcome that. However, Nancy identified farmers as being more proactive in their approach to education. *I find farm kids are more driven and I think it's because their parents can value education knowing that with the change in the weather... you really got to have a backup plan.* She explained that most of those students finished Year 12 and went to university before returning to the farm or they completed a diploma at the local Agriculture College that was 30 minutes away.

6.4. Part Two: Discussion

The data showed that Nancy was deeply embedded in her community and identified her local status as beneficial to her job. The personal relationships and firsthand knowledge of her community enabled her to respond to changes – in her work and her town – and she tailored her tasks and priorities to meet these needs. Her stake in the future of her community and her ongoing relationships drove her to develop and evolve her pathways advising for anyone who needed it.

6.4.1. Rural social space.

The local people and community were Nancy's priority. Nancy enjoyed the lifestyle, which echoed Jenkins, Reitano and Taylor's (2011) findings that the rural lifestyle was the main reason teachers reported choosing to work and stay in rural schools. While their study involved teachers, it seems likely to apply to education support staff as well, particularly since Nancy was a local.

6.4.1.1. Relationship building and supporting the community.

Nancy reported that her status as a visible and active member of her community was a key factor in being successful in her job. It provided her with a sense of satisfaction in her work.

Nancy's advising from the sidelines of the footy oval was a demonstration of her availability. She framed the sporting club as a centre of the community – a way for her to be involved and to be seen by many people. Sporting clubs, particularly Australian Rules Football clubs, have been at the heart of rural Victorian communities for well over a century and have served "in the formation of social networks that influenced information flows and were inclusive of new arrivals and minority groups" (Frost, Lightbody & Halabi, 2013, p. 453). Nancy took advantage of these social networks and was able to perform multiple aspects of her job in one place – she updated parent knowledge and answered their questions, liaised with local business owners, and interacted with students outside of school to strengthen their relationships. Interestingly, the examples she gave of work done at footy tended to focus on interactions with university-bound students, their parents, and with employers. This suggested the adults in attendance had certain levels of social and cultural capital – elements linked to shaping student aspirations (Cuervo, Chesters & Aberdeen, 2019). It was also consistent with Frost et al.'s (2013) findings that clubs were increasingly actively encouraging participation of at-risk youth and provided support through positive male role models and an inclusive environment, even if their parents were not involved. Nancy reported that much of her time at school was spent with students who were not likely to go on to university, so she might justify the work she did at the sporting club as one way she balanced the needs of the different groups of students. She framed her advising and relationship building outside of school hours as an element of being part of a small community. While she would appreciate not having her family dinners interrupted, she acknowledged that she had specialised information that would help other people in her community. Her knowledge of pathways options and locally available jobs – built over time through her many interactions with the community – formed part of the social capital she was able "to contribute to the social, civic or economic well-being" (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000, p. 103) of Southwick. Nancy's advising and liaising work outside of school hours were testament to the wide scope of her role and the need to be accessible to other adults. Often this meant being accessible outside of traditional working hours. Nancy seemed to characterise these interactions as necessary, beneficial, and inevitable as an active member of the local community.

These relationships, especially in the wider community, were vital to Nancy's work in coordinating Work Placements. She recognised the importance of local employers that participated and she framed the program as operating on their good will. This network of relationships with local businesses had built up over years of living in town and working as the career advisor. This included the referrals by other members of the community and businesses

approaching her directly to fill a need. Granovetter (2005) explored the links between social networks and economic outlooks, drawing connections between the density and trust within the network and found that "prospective employers and employees prefer to learn about one another from personal sources whose information they trust" (p. 36). This was reflective of how Nancy viewed herself as a link between employers and students, a potentially powerful and influential position in the community.

6.4.1.2. Building community sustainability.

Nancy's work also had a strong focus on the local area and its sustainability. Nancy specifically stated that pathways advisors needed to know about the local land and types of agriculture. She chose professional learning opportunities that were targeted at the future of agricultural work and reported being inspired to help students prepare and achieve locally. This continued to reinforce Reid et al.'s (2010) premise that teachers need to understand their communities and "professional education programs… have proved inadequate in terms of meeting the challenge of professional practice in and for rural schooling" (p. 274). As someone who undertook the formal qualification to become a certified careers advisor, Nancy preferred the local Network as professional learning and credited it with teaching her how to do her job. Lyons, Cookey, Panizzon, Parnell, and Pegg (2006) promoted the use of educator networks as a way to combat the professional isolation and to build capacity of local knowledge. They called for an increase in support for establishing local networks of teachers to promote better mentoring and collaboration between teachers in order to meet the needs of rural teachers and so improve rural education outcomes. Their research highlighted that the unique challenges of rural and remote education require solutions that were supported by governing organisations but developed by rural and remote educators. Nancy identified the opportunity to collaborate as a reason she participated in the Network, valuing its focus on local issues and its store of local pathways knowledge.

6.4.1.3. A change in demographics.

Nancy noted a recent change in the population of Southwick with an increase in families with a lower SES background and more students with literacy and numeracy issues. This change in demographic in rural towns was a widespread phenomenon facing communities (see Chapter

One). Cuervo (2016) described the changes in demographics of many rural communities – but, importantly, not all – over recent decades as being part of a downward spiral of fewer employment opportunities and dwindling populations. These rural towns became significantly cheaper to live in compared to urban areas, and with many local jobs requiring few if any qualifications, rural populations had shifted toward places of lower socioeconomics. Nancy found this shift in demographics had affected her work in that she had to spend more time overseeing and assisting the VET students with their theory work at school and hold more intervention interviews to help students see the point in continuing through Year 12. Many of the stories she shared during the interview revolved around how she acted as a support to some of the at-risk students, including what she reported to be her 'best' experience in the job. In order to help keep students at school and to gain their VET and VCAL qualifications, Nancy had to convince the parents as well. She gave the example of talking to a father – a mechanic who had left school at Year 10 – about his son who needed to complete Year 12 and increase his numeracy skills to be qualified in the industry. However, Nancy highlighted the fact that while the farming community had shrunk and their futures had become more precarious, these families had responded positively to changes in education and qualifications. This might be due in part to their recognition of the continued rural restructuring as described by Cuervo (2016) and Gill's (2011) prediction that the number of farmers in Australia might drop by 30-50% between 1996 and 2021 due to consolidation and climate change. Nancy considered these students to be some of the more driven and their parents to be supportive of their continued education, through university or at the nearby Agriculture College. Through her own professional learning from the agriculture-based professional development opportunities and informal conversations with local farmers, she had adjusted her advice to support students in gaining a qualification to help future-proof the family farm or provided them with an alternate career.

6.4.1.4. Effects of poor student engagement with pathways planning.

Nancy considered that a growing sense of student apathy and lack of responsibility for planning for their futures was making it more difficult for her to do her job. The lack of student interest might be tied to students not seeing the relevance of schooling toward locally available jobs, especially when many jobs did not require post-compulsory qualifications (Alston & Kent, 2006). Nancy had recognised, however, that these perceptions were often inaccurate and to engage students in career planning was one way to correct these expectations. Her conclusion

and motivation for pursuing these disengaged students was supported by Plasman's (2018) findings that students who created career plans were more engaged with their schooling. Plasman (2018) found when "students identify their long-term personal goals… what they expect to accomplish as they work toward their goals, and improve their self-efficacy as they meet check-points along the path toward their goals" (p. 240) they saw more value in their schoolwork. This sentiment was echoed in Nancy's descriptions of the advising sessions she had with her apathetic students.

Nancy also spent a good deal of her working time focusing on VET and VCAL students, supporting them through school. She tried to get these students Work Placements and secured employment around town as soon as possible to keep them at school and helped them to recognise the importance of staying at school. This also involved creating career plans with students so that they understood the connections between what they did at school and the future career they want. Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, and Perry (2006) argued that there were a "modest, yet significant, contribution of indices of career development to indices of school engagement, including feelings of valuing and belonging in school" (p. 266). This was reflected in Nancy's narrative when she described the extent of her involvement with students at risk of becoming disengaged from school and needing to push some along until they could access the practical trade-related education opportunities and perhaps mature enough to see the value in staying at school. While she needed to encourage university-bound students to explore possible careers online and then guide them through the application process, she did not think they needed as much of her attention as the VET and VCAL students.

6.4.2. Social justice.

Nancy's narrative described some of the local, proactive responses to systemic problems of social justice being undertaken by her work. Cuervo (2018) pointed out, "it would be naïve to expect that teachers' work alone can redress structural problems faced by rural schools and communities" (p. 12) since Australian education funding continued to reinforce the inequities of the system. He argued addressing these inequities on a larger-scale were "of utmost significance because it is the public schools… in rural communities" (p. 13) that were left to manage at the coalface. Much of Nancy's work could be seen as her on-the-ground attempts to ease the local manifestations of systematic problems such as supporting the College's changes to its careers education program and serving as the community's employment consultant. Nancy recognised

that she has a tremendous amount of specific, specialised information in her head that she could share with people who did not have access to it or would struggle to understand it. For her, it was the right thing to do as part of the community. These aspects of her work were examples of the efforts teachers make to alleviate the effects of inequality and reinforced Cuervo's (2018) assertion that teachers alone cannot solve the problems of injustice. With her heavy focus on her community, many of her concerns were distributive injustices, but she also shared concerns about the recognition of her work and wanting to have more voice in what her role should be.

6.4.2.1. Distributive justice: Responding to the inequality of opportunities for career exploration.

One of the systemic injustices that remained were the difficulties involved with creating an equality of opportunity for pathways exploration activities. James (2001) argued that "educational advantage and disadvantage are the result of a three-way intersection of family socioeconomics background, the characteristics of the urban or rural context in which people live, and the physical distance from campuses" (p. 469). This advantage or disadvantage affected student aspirations, and as in James' study, the likelihood of attending university. Nancy's work included attempts to expose her students to campuses and other external careers-related opportunities that reflected the needs of the town's changing demographics. Due to the town's location, accessing these opportunities required excursions. Nancy identified the onerous amounts of paperwork and substantial costs as additional obstacles which often meant she did not organise such trips. The lack of adequate resources to assist her students in obtaining these experiences, especially since many of their families cannot afford to do so themselves, potentially limited student aspirations and career options.

As an attempted remedy for the injustice arising from inadequate funding to overcome the costs stemming from their geographic location, Nancy had focused on providing as many local experiences as possible. One way she did this was through the development of partnerships with local employers. For such partnerships to be successful, they required a collaborative approach between the school and outside organisations in order to "include relevant authentic learning experiences for their students" (Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams, & Jago, 2017, p. 169). Similar to Woodroffe and colleagues' findings, Nancy valued these partnerships as providing positive role models for students and for demonstrating "linkages and real life examples of pathways to education and employment" (p. 169). While Nancy's partnerships appeared to be

more informal than those described by Woodroffe et al., the benefits for her own professional development and for students' aspirations in exploring local work options were likely to be similar.

6.4.2.2. Recognitional justice: An underappreciation of the extent of her work.

Nancy's narrative revealed some concerns that related to recognitional justice, namely the frustrations she had with the various perceptions of her work. She expressed that both her principal and the wider education system did not recognise or appreciate the nature of her work.

Nancy's responses to authority figures not recognising the importance of pathways advising could be seen as another example of how her local work might begin to address wider systemic issues of social injustice. Gale and Densmore (2002) called for a sense of recognitional justice that respected self-identification, opportunities for self-development, and participation in decisions-making that effects them. Nancy appeared to act in ways that should improve the recognition of her work by others; rather than simply feeling aggrieved by the lack of recognition, she had taken advantage of the situation and was glad for the professional freedom to do whatever she deemed necessary. For example, she indicated that her principal had very little knowledge about the work she did and seemed to take little notice of her. However, this had allowed her the autonomy to undertake the professional learning she considered most appropriate, developed relationships with local businesses to improve connections and pathway options for students, and decided on how her time at school was best spent – including the time she spent off-campus cultivating relationships or the community members who came to her office for advice. Notably, her off-campus work likely had an additional benefit in that it raised awareness of the nature of her work with community members. The examples she provided about community members and past students approaching her for advice would indicate there was a solid understanding in the community about what Nancy did. This was in stark contrast to her portrayal of her principal's understanding.

Nancy also expressed frustrations with a system that did not recognise the professionalism of educators and burdened them with increasing accountability measures and paperwork. She identified this as the worst part of her job. Cuervo (2016) asserted that the "increasing pressures on teachers' work through greater accountability and performance were tied to concerns and claims of fewer resources" (p. 124) and that rural teachers "were cognizant,

and many times critical, of their changing roles due to pressure from neoliberal policy technologies that constrained their work" (p. 197), reducing their professional agency. An example Nancy gave of additional accountability-related paperwork that she had to undertake was due to the structure of Work Placement in Southwick.

6.4.2.3. Associational justice: Making the most of misrecognition.

In many ways, Nancy's work was shaped by efforts that could be classified as aiming to improve aspects of associational justice. Cuervo (2016) identified participation in regional teacher networks and the need for greater communication between authorities and rural educators as two key elements to improving associational justice. He argued that participation in the networks alleviates the professional isolation many rural educators feel and that these groups created "valuable channels of communication, support, and knowledge about the teaching and application of educational policies" (p. 184). Nancy's description of the Network and its importance to doing and learning her role, echoed the sentiments of many of Cuervo's (2016) participants. She framed it as an invaluable source of place-conscious and rural-focused professional learning. This was consistent with the Country Education Project's (2010) findings of preferred professional development activities of rural Victorian teachers. The place-consciousness and power invested in the Network had also resulted in its ability to tailor the Careers Expo to suit local needs. Nancy's description of how the Network was able to decide, develop, and deliver both professional learning opportunities for participants and the annual priorities of the Expo itself were examples of "meaningful participation disarticulates dominant discourses and opens the door to different voices," (p. 101) which Cuervo (2016) asserted was a key element to associational justice for rural schools.

However, there was a sense that, in part, Nancy was able to construct the role as she saw fit because of a lack of recognition resulting from poor communication with authority figures (as explored above). Cuervo (2016) found that "teachers and principals argue that they would benefit from a renewed focus by governments on the recognition of teachers' and principals' work and their status" (p. 185). Through his exploration of various examples from both principals and teachers, Cuervo (2016) detailed shortcomings in areas of distributive and recognitional justice – two examples being poor prioritisation of funding and fundamental misunderstandings of how rurality affects schooling – that could be addressed through improved associational justice. In short, if decision-makers such as the government, the DET, and

principals themselves engaged in more meaningful communication that valued rural teacher input rather than tokenising it, then conditions in rural schools, education, and communities would improve. In Nancy's narrative this was exemplified in her relationship with her principal. She did not feel valued and reported he did not know what she did. While she made the most of this situation, it could be argued that she would be even more successful in her advising work if she were better supported from the school.

6.5. Summary

Nancy's sense of being a local and her embeddedness to her community shaped all aspects of her work. The work she did in and out of school – despite the lack of recognition of her role by her principal – demonstrated her awareness of her rural social space and that she had a vested interest in improving elements of social justice for her community. Key amongst these efforts were the strength and variety of partnerships with local employers and the practical ways in which she had addressed systemic issues of social justice the best she could with the influence she had. Her engagement with professional learning opportunities that she felt best suited her rural context, including being active in the Network, reflected her commitment to improve some of the social injustices facing her own work, her students, and her community. Nancy's efforts towards providing a better pathways exploration program were targeted at benefiting her students now and for the future of Southwick.

Chapter Seven: Sarah: Learning on the Job

How's it been [becoming the Pathways Coordinator]? Hard. I've just been feeling that I'm not here being able to give … the students that 100% attention because I've got those two days off. Having Amber there, she's been a great help… assisting and she just lets me know that the students have come in and I'm able to catch up to them. Not being able to catch… them straight away is hard and, to be honest, I feel at times, even though I'm given three periods a week [time] allowance, I just don't feel that that's enough. Like I just feel that I can't, I haven't matched the potential that I feel that I could have.

7.1. Part One: Wyben College's Pathways Coordinator

Sarah was not a qualified careers practitioner and did not *even know where to start looking for something like that*. She expressed some confusion as to whether or not she needed to be qualified, but since Ron, the school principal had not required it, she had not undertaken any study. Sarah worked three days a week, mainly teaching senior Maths, although her teaching qualification was in Physical Education. As Pathways Coordinator[17], she was responsible for subject selection interviews, assisting students with their Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) and South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) applications as well as Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS)[18] and scholarships, collating data for the Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS), and also worked closely with the principal to plan which senior school subjects could be offered each year. In addition to establishing which subjects were offered, Sarah worked with Linda, an education support staff member, to collect and enter senior school grades into VASS.

Sarah was in her first year as Pathways Coordinator. Previously, she had worked in an ecumenical private school in another rural area, where she had become interested in pathways advising. She was happy when the opportunity arose at Wyben, despite not feeling she had

[17] Sarah's title is Pathways Coordinator and she differentiates between careers education and pathways advising as two elements of her role.

[18] SEAS is collection of equity programs offered by tertiary institutions. There are four categories: Personal information and location, disadvantaged financial background, disability or medical condition, and difficult circumstances. Students can apply for these as part of the VTAC process.

enough time for the onerous role. Sarah enjoyed listening to students share their dreams and helping them plan to achieve them. Since commencing as Pathways Coordinator, Sarah had, for the most part, been learning on the job informally. She shared an office with Amber, an education support staff member whose role included careers exploration-related tasks. Sarah had support from within Wyben College, as the principal had previously served as the school's pathways advisor and her predecessor was still working there.

Sarah considered her identity as a local as advantageous. *I understand the students because I was one of them. I haven't come from the city … They're not like city students, completely different.* Sarah credited her visibility and involvement in the community for the strong relationships she had formed with students and their families. *We [she and her husband] get involved, heavily involved, with the community generally because… we've been born and bred here so… we've probably got… a better student relationship out of school. …… There are some students that I've known since they were babies. Having that relationship outside of school and for them to see that we're human as well, I think that's really important.* Sarah understood some students' desires to just be on the farm rather than at school, and as a local had *probably got a bit more understanding of students wanting to choose VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning] or choose apprenticeships over finishing school and going off to university as well.* However, she thought non-locals could overcome these barriers to being an effective pathways advisor, but *it takes them a bit longer to adapt… and to know that some kids are just going to do nothing for you because… they want to be on the farm… we've just got to do the best we can for them. Probably that communication with their parents… might be easier because we've known their parents for a bit longer.* Sarah also considered her approachability and positive personality as key traits for her role.

7.1.1. Careers education and pathways advising.

Sarah was part of the senior school team of teachers which included the Year 11 and 12 coordinators, the Vocational Education Training (VET) Coordinator, and the VCAL Coordinator. The make-up of this team had undergone personnel changes as people took on different, or multiple roles. While Sarah needed to have an understanding of VET and VCAL in order to assist students in their subject selection interviews, she was not in charge of the programs nor involved with them on a daily basis. For example, she was not responsible for helping students secure school-based apprenticeships, but she was a point of contact for the

school for employers. She worked closely with Amber – a local who had worked in pathways advising for over 14 years and assisted the College's last five advisors. Amber also worked part-time, but they arranged it so one of them was always at school. They shared a Pathways Office and had divided the duties between them; Amber was responsible for organising the Work Experience program, conducting and recording Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) interviews, and assisting with subject selection interviews, whereas Sarah had a stronger focus on the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) coordination. However, due to the nature of pathways advising and conducting subject-selection interviews, Sarah needed to have a working knowledge of all the senior school areas. This extended to the careers education classes held in Years 9 and 10. The variety of her duties and the number of areas she oversaw were reflected in her title as 'coordinator.' She may not have taught careers education or organised Work Experience, but she coordinated the staff members who did. The provision of pathways exploration and planning in 2017 was spread amongst six staff members with Sarah in the centre. Her description of Wyben College's programs reflected her varying levels of involvement with each and, especially in her first year, she acknowledged there were areas that she was unfamiliar with.

7.1.1.1. Work Experience.

One example of this division of responsibilities was the Work Experience program, which Sarah was *quite happy to handball* [pass off] to Amber because of its size. She was still learning about all the details and administrative requirements. At Wyben College, students could do Work Experience in Year 10 and 11. In Year 10, students tended to do it locally because they did not have accommodation elsewhere, but in Year 11 the College organised a week-long camp in Melbourne. *They don't have to go to Melbourne, but I think that whole Melbourne trip's been really beneficial for them because it's quite eye-opening for country students to go down there and actually catch the tram to work or catch the train to work or understand that as well.* Sarah found that students tended to try traditional jobs, even in Melbourne, like teaching, allied health, or farming. She also believed that a student's comfort level in the city influenced their university decision-making.

7.1.1.2. Careers education program.

Sarah did not teach any careers education classes and was unsure of their content and structure. She was interested in teaching them in the future, but it was too much to absorb in her first year in the role. Sarah thought there was a class in Year 10 with one or two periods a week. She was appreciative when outside groups wanted to come to the school to speak with the students. *We have different universities come here… different professions as well. We've had Aussie Silos, which is just down the road from here, a big business that wants to come down to talk to the students about possible apprenticeships and stuff like that... So, there's people out there that really want to come and talk to the school, so that's really good. I really like that and we've never said no.* There were also excursions, but these could be difficult due to time, money, and distance constraints. Every year students attended the local Careers Expo and the Year Nine students accessed the ArtsConnect program. This was a program supported by the Arts Centre Melbourne that paid for rural students' transportation costs to Melbourne, which for Wyben was roughly $40-50 per student, as long as they participate in an approved arts-based activity. Sarah explained that Wyben College used to run this as a very long daytrip, but had now incorporated the programs and funding into a week-long camp. This had provided time for staff to take students to a university campus to become more familiar with the tertiary experience.

7.1.1.3. Assisting students with subject selections.

One of Sarah's key responsibilities was to conduct the subject selection interviews for students in Years 9-11. She found it was an illuminating, time consuming, and frustrating process. *It was crazy… four weeks of doing subject selections and you still have students going, 'I don't think I've chosen the right subject,' and you [have to] go through [the] whole thing. 'Well is it going to be a prerequisite? What do you want to do?' And then you've got some teachers that are pretty pushy about students that shouldn't be doing VCE or they should be doing VCE, but really they should be doing VCAL. So, it's that happy medium of trying to put up with listening, but also going ok, we need to do what's best for these students, not what's necessarily best for the teachers*. Once the first round of interviews and student preferences were completed, Sarah worked with Ron to determine which VCE subjects would be offered the following year. These were determined by student interest and teacher availability. Sarah

regretted that, because of the small enrolment numbers, they were unable to offer all of the subjects students were interested in, and she found it difficult to re-interview the students who missed out on their preferred choices.

The ability to cater to students' needs was a complicated and important issue for Sarah and the College. *We've lost students to Westfield [College and] to the new religious school in Westfield, which is not ideal. They send a bus.* Sarah detailed that some students needed to complete their chosen subjects via Distance Education and while *that's not ideal… the students that have chosen those subjects are more than capable.* She also elaborated on the restrictions on the subjects offered due to staffing constraints. *We don't necessarily have the teachers that specialise… available to teach some of these subjects… we [have]… so many part-time staff, too… I've seen firsthand what Levi [her husband] goes through trying to get that timetable sorted out! It's not pleasant!*

7.1.1.4. Advising on university pathways.

Sarah discussed several obstacles facing students and their families regarding the university decision-making process. There were challenges around investigating options, applying, and choosing where to go. *We're pretty lucky in a sense, most parents are willing to do it [take students to Open Days], but I find those low socioeconomic status… students, they're so disadvantaged… Look at the ones that have their parents go and take them to things, take them to university Open Days or revision lectures in VCE. I know it's not to do with careers, but you just go, 'they're so lucky that they've got that help,' … We've provided it at the school, but not as much as we could possibly do it.* Despite a reliance on free internet resources, for herself and for her students, Sarah was wary of them. She found the VTAC and SATAC websites to be overly complicated. She also pointed out that while these resources were available, students needed to take the responsibility upon themselves to use them. Sarah said when students did use them, or the array of physical pamphlets displayed in the careers study room, they could feel overwhelmed with the options. *I think our students… have very narrow vision… I think that they've still got the blinkers on a fair bit... They're going very traditional, which is fine, there as well, but I think there's so many different professions out there.* Sarah took a pragmatic stance on the types of university courses on offer. While she discussed how students and families could be overwhelmed by the choices, she pointed out that if it was in her power, she would abolish

degrees that *don't lead onto anything*. She preferred courses that led directly to a specific profession.

When it came to the big decision of where to study, Sarah found her students preferred regional universities. She thought this was because the regional universities understood rural students and their needs better, tended to have established a relationship with students during high school through outreach programs, and *generally, what I've heard is that they're … happier at the regional places because it's more related to them. It's small campus, not getting lost, and stuff like that… Some students don't handle that very well, being crowded and that kind of stuff.* If students did need to decide between Melbourne and Adelaide, she thought their choice was affected by their familiarity with the cities. This was one reason she supported excursions to the city and campuses. Sarah said more students go to Adelaide, despite the school trips to Melbourne, because it felt more regional, with a smaller city centre. Additionally, Wyben students were eligible for bonus points on their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)[19] scores if they studied at certain South Australian universities, which may have drawn some to that option.

7.1.2. Lack of time.

Sarah identified a number of challenges she attributed to being new in the role, which she expected would improve with experience. Chief among these was the feeling of not having enough time. This manifested itself in a variety of ways and arose frequently in her narrative. *I'd like more time. Have I said that enough? More time!* When she had been considering taking up the role, she identified only working three days a week as a likely problem, but her concerns were outweighed by her enthusiasm. However, as the year progressed, she felt she did not have enough time to upskill herself. This included having difficulties getting to professional development opportunities and Network meetings. While she was learning in real time what the role actual entailed, she found it frustrating that *people add stuff to my role here, there, and everywhere,* which was problematic when it was such a large role already. She had identified the core tasks – such as subject selections and tertiary applications – she had to accomplish and set aside the rest to be learned in the future. When trying to list her tasks, she concluded with, *I*

[19] The ATAR is a numerical ranking of students leaving Year 12 across the state based on their academic scores. It is used as the primary criterion in university applications.

think that's pretty much – I can't really remember. I get snowed under with everything. Sarah pointed out several areas of her role that she had not had the time to fully immerse herself in including: details about Work Experience, the content and structure of the careers education classes, and how to become a qualified careers advisor.

Sarah wanted to attend more professional learning opportunities but found it difficult to get away. The biggest obstacles to attending more professional learning included a lack of time, the distance and costs associated with traveling, and finding someone to look after her young daughters. She acknowledged that she would most likely have to volunteer her time to attend. Sarah was keen for the Network meetings to be held online so that she could attend more of them. *It's alright for them that can meet at lunchtime and… miss a little bit of class, but it's not so helpful for us that live out of town [Westfield]… I haven't gone to all of them… I do read the minutes of the meetings and stuff like that, and catch up if there's anything that I'm not sure about… it's pretty hard.* She wanted other providers, such as universities, to offer more virtual options for professional development. *To do these things virtually, to allow people like me in remote places to not have to drive… a 10 hour trip if you go there and back in a day, and… we don't have the money in the school to be able to accommodate that, and… I don't have the time for that either.* She was particularly aware of missing out on these opportunities since she did not have a relevant qualification and was new to the role.

Sarah also felt she did not have enough time to dedicate to her students. She wanted to be able to speak to students when they were ready to talk. *Having students just pop in, unannounced… it's great but… you're just so busy and you just want to say, 'I can't do it now' and you feel really bad that you just say 'you gotta come back another time.'* She added these concerns were partially alleviated by sharing an office with Amber.

For Sarah, this constant time pressure was an ongoing stressor. *I like to feel in control and I don't necessarily feel in control all the time.* She had had discussions with Ron about returning to work fulltime after her daughters started school, and appreciated that she was able to bring them into her office in the meantime. However, she considered things to be improving. *I guess it will come easier though… once I get my head… around everything.* Sarah thought the time limitations had prevented her from reaching her full potential.

7.2. Looking Forward

While Sarah had struggled *not drowning* in her first year, she was optimistic about her confidence improving and becoming more efficient once she understood the role better. She had her mind on the future of pathways both in and out of the school.

7.2.1. Future of careers education at Wyben College.

Going forward, Sarah wanted to expand the careers education program at Wyben College and to become more involved with it. She wanted offer more Work Experience for students and to take them to one of the bigger career expos in Melbourne. Sarah also would like to teach careers education classes.

In her opinion, *careers education should be looking at a wide variety of different pathways to get into different jobs. It shouldn't just be… saying you need to go to university or you need to go onto the farm. We should be catering it towards all ranges of students… We also need to talk about where the jobs are going to be as well. I think that's really important… we need to make the students aware… [what] is going to be the big area in the next five or 10 years... it's important to make sure that you come out to be the best that you can be, so you can succeed in life… I personally don't want to see any of my students have to go onto welfare payments because they're not qualified, or don't know where to go to be qualified.* Additionally, Sarah would like to see more entrepreneurship taught at school and more life skills around taxes and filling out common government forms.

7.2.2. Future of the community.

Sarah had her eyes on the future of Wyben. She calculated that roughly half of the students decided to leave for university, while the other half stayed in town for work after Year 12. There were limited opportunities for the students who stayed in town and few attractive professional jobs to draw past-students home. She saw opportunities for students to return to work in the health industry, but even the possibility of a teaching career was dwindling. Wyben's population was shrinking and ageing while the College was competing with schools in Westfield and, to a lesser extent, private boarding schools. Sarah pointed out that the only local

business, a poultry processing plant, that was growing and hiring unskilled, new workers was not an option local students wanted to take up. She highlighted two instances of local businesses responding to the changing times. One of the silo makers had approached the school about needing apprentices and farmers were increasingly encouraging their children to go onto further study.

7.3. Part Two: Discussion

Sarah's narrative presented a number of insights into the process of becoming a pathways advisor in a rural area. It revealed tensions between deeply knowing, and a strong connection to, the community but not knowing as much about the technical aspects of the job, for example the VTAC application process. Her connections and emotional investments in the community – past, present, and future – seemed to be a motivation for doing the job but were also a source of stress while she learned to do it well. When discussing her work, Sarah focused on the importance of relationships with the community, the need to assist students to explore careers locally and further afield, and the influence of local resources in developing student aspirations. Sarah's narrative also identified a number of social justice issues that centred on the challenges of accessing a wide variety of opportunities for herself and her students, the various levels of understanding of the role of a pathways advisor, and isolation issues as someone new to the role and who was geographically cut off from her main external source of professional learning.

7.3.1. Rural social space.

Sarah's conversation highlighted the unique manifestations of pathways issues in her community and school resulting from the town's particular rural social space. Wyben College's pathways exploration program was structured to reflect the priorities and knowledge of staff. Sarah detailed the state of various local businesses that included the ways they interacted with the school and were responding to changing economic times. Wyben was experiencing some of the changes typical in modern Australia's 'rural restructuring,' such as a reduction in farming jobs as the agriculture industry consolidated and an ageing population (Cuervo, 2016). Sarah highlighted two examples directly related to these changes as a local silo-maker coming to the

school to engage with students about possible employment opportunities and by identifying healthcare as one of the only long-term viable professional careers locally.

7.3.1.1. Benefits of being a local.

Sarah's narrative included many examples of how her life-long involvement in Wyben's rural social space provided her with insights and affected her approach to her work – for example, she noticed the change over time in local industry and had developed visibility and trust in the community through her extra-curricular activities. In terms of pathways advice, Sarah considered her students to have different needs from those of urban students. She framed these needs in a way that recognised and supported both the Leavers and Stayers. By doing so, she avoided perpetuating the negative stigma around students who wanted to stay local, identified and explored by, for example, Corbett (2007, 2010) and Petrin, Schafft, and Meece (2014). Corbett and Forsey (2017) contended that, "educational success and valued aspirational attitudes promoted by policy and opinion-makers tend to conflate success with mobility" (p. 441). In other words, there was a cultural stereotype that work requiring higher qualifications – that was more highly regarded – needed to be done in urban locales, while rural areas only provided 'less desirable' and typically manual labour opportunities. Sarah's narrative revealed that she tried to expose students to local options as well as jobs that were located elsewhere. For example, she welcomed local businesses and universities into the school to talk to students.

In this vein, Sarah thought her role would be difficult for someone who was not local because it would take them a long time to come to fully understand the community. Sarah linked her embeddedness in the community, including the strong interpersonal relationships, as something that enabled her to do her job well – as teacher and as pathways coordinator – making the local aspects of her role easier to do. This school and community knowledge was part of her understanding of the rural social space. Her acknowledgement of the importance of local social capital aligned with the growing body of literature (for example see Downes & Roberts, 2018; Reid et al., 2010) suggesting it was a key element to ensuring new teaching graduates were appropriately prepared for working and staying in rural communities. When teachers know their particular place by "recognising and valuing the forms of social and symbolic capital that exist there, rather than elsewhere" (Reid et al., 2010, p. 272), they are better able to develop relevance and connectedness to the curriculum for their students. Additionally, White (2015) argued there was a need for greater "significance placed on school and community knowledge" (p. 56) in

order for teachers to be successful in their rural schools and so for their school and community's longer-term wellbeing through a reduction in teacher turnover. Green and Reid (2019) argued that teacher turnover could result in a loss of local knowledge and gave the perception that short-staying teachers did not value local culture or students. This was in stark contrast to the time and commitment necessary to 'come to know' a place as it required establishing relationships within the community and school (Wallace, Boylan, Mitchell, & Strecklus, 2008). As a local who was an active participant in the community, Sarah had been able to draw on her lifetime's worth of acquired local social and symbolic capital in order to tailor her advising to suit the needs of her students, school, and community.

7.3.1.2. Recognising and responding to local resources.

Sarah's embeddedness in the community and her positive personality may have resulted in rose-coloured glasses when she discussed the community, although she did identify some problems. She discussed how fortunate the school and students were that so many of them could access external opportunities like Open Days and revision lectures in contrast to some of the College's lower SES students, whom she considered to be more disadvantaged. This expression of luck was an example of how "grateful subjectivity underlines the sense of precariousness and lack of entitlement to resources and infrastructure for rural people" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 140). This was an indication of how each rural community had differing levels of access to resources – Cuervo (2016) detailed an example of the 'luck' of one town having good access to health services, while Sarah cited the number of families able to access outside activities. These were both examples of resources and opportunities that could be taken for granted in more urban areas, with ease of access just assumed. It was a symptom of a systemic issue that Sarah considered it lucky to be able to expose students to opportunities readily available to urban students.

While Sarah expressed concerns around growing student apathy about their career futures, she also laid out the ways she tried to address that problem. She worried about the future of local businesses and farms and had identified the instability of the town that relied on them. She highlighted that there were few employment opportunities in trades and even fewer in professional areas – including traditional jobs such as teaching and health care. This wase a problem for the future, and she worried that students who wanted to return home would not be able to find employment. These worries echo Cuervo's (2016) concern that:

> The incapacity to retain or attract young people to rural areas is a critical disadvantage toward their sustainability. This incapacity is given not only by the lack of post-school opportunities but also by a curriculum oriented toward becoming mobile and urban (where opportunities lie) and decentered from any local meaning. (p. 151)

Sarah's consciousness of this problem may have resulted in her providing practical advice to her students and shaped the partnerships between the school and local businesses. She identified some of the proactive and creative ways local employers were responding to these impending crises. She wanted to help students prepare for this uncertain future and to potentially help the town stay viable through a greater focus on teaching entrepreneurial skills. Sarah's approach to pathways advising, a position of some influence in the community, reflected the findings of Roberts and Downes' (2016) that rural community group leaders "understood sustainability as a future oriented concept while offering strong personal commitments" (p. 23). Sarah did this by strengthening the partnerships the school had with local businesses and her desire to develop a pathways exploration program that was tailored to their aspirations and community's needs.

7.3.2. Social justice.

Sarah's narrative revealed a number of issues of social justice that affected her work. She identified obstacles in accessing external opportunities for herself and her students, as well as challenges around raising student aspirations. Sarah raised several uncertainties about the understanding and perception of the role of pathways advisors inside and outside of the school. Additionally, a number of the frustrations she expressed spoke to issues of professional isolation, including not knowing where or how to speak up for herself and the shortcomings of the local Network in terms of catering to the geographically distant members.

7.3.2.1. Distributive justice: Challenges for accessing opportunities.

Many of the challenges that Sarah identified in her role pointed to the problematic nature of systems that purport to redress issues of social justice through a redistribution of resources. For Sarah, in her rural context, many of these limitations manifested themselves as issues of access that restricted or undermined notions of equality of opportunity. Cuervo (2016) argued that neoliberal policies have had a more dramatic and damaging effects on rural communities

and their industries than urban ones. With an increased focus on "market mechanisms to promote regional efficiency and competitiveness" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 23), rural communities lose out on things like access to post offices or banks, and farms are encouraged to consolidate because smaller populations result in a lower rate of return. This leads to a downward spiral of shrinking populations and fewer businesses that exacerbate the underlying problem. Given Sarah's outlook on the economic future of Wyben recognised this, she was keen to spark her students' interest in jobs of the future, especially tech-related careers. In order to do this, she and her students needed to be able to access opportunities outside of town, which she described as challenging.

Many of the issues that affected Sarah's work and faced her students centred on the challenge of accessing opportunities. That Sarah felt she needed to focus on creating greater access to opportunities spoke to the skewed distribution of access toward urban centres. For example, she cited obstacles to upskilling herself, which included the underlying problems of not knowing where to look for professional development opportunities and not being able to access the Network meetings regularly. Sarah's challenge of finding time was consistent with Jenkins, Reitano, and Taylor's (2011) findings about the barriers rural teachers face dwhen trying to access effective professional learning. They identified – as did Sarah – that some of the most common obstacles were time, distance, costs, and resources. Jenkins et al. (2011) recommended that rural teachers be provided with additional resources to address those logistical obstacles in order to "facilitate a greater degree of equity between rural and urban teachers in the area of professional learning" (p. 81). Sarah also expressed the need for more support to attend professional learning opportunities and identified that the school alone was not able to provide this additional support. This may suggest the need for policy change.

7.3.2.1.1. Role of the school in distributing resources and shaping student aspirations.

For Sarah, the school was a significant avenue for expanding student aspirations, which was a key aspect in promoting distributive justice. Sarah recognised that her students needed to access career exploration opportunities outside of Wyben for their futures, but that there were significant obstacles. She was excited that her students had such a wide range of ideas about their future careers, but also disappointed that a number of them chose traditional careers when they undertook Work Experience even in Melbourne, particularly since these jobs did not appear

to have stable futures in Wyben. Utilising the school and its resources to help bolster student aspirations was consistent with Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, Hutchins' (2011) argument that positive "schooling experiences… were predictive of educational achievement and aspirations" (p. 1225). They found that school characteristics had more of an influence on high-poverty students, which mirrored Sarah's discussion about how Wyben College tried to provide a variety of experiences for their students, especially since some of the more disadvantaged students would not be able to access them otherwise.

Sarah identified multiple issues facing the school when it came to catering to students' aspirational needs. The underlying factor in these issues were the small and shrinking enrolment numbers and the impact this had on staffing the school. Shrinking enrolments resulted in fewer resources, putting the school and its students at a greater disadvantage. The narrowing of the curriculum – as a result of fewer students, fewer staff, and timetable clashes – made it more difficult for the College to compete with schools like Westfield College and boarding schools, something Sarah was acutely aware of. This suggested that there were issues of inequality not just between urban and rural schools, but between regional and rural schools. During the time period when these research interviews were taking place, one local family was trying to negotiate access to a speciality subject for their senior school child, pressuring Wyben to offer it or else they would leave to attend Westfield College. Ultimately, the family decided on the hour commute to Westfield, and Wyben College lost a number of enrolments (through younger siblings) and a staff member. Sarah viewed this as another example of the pressure to shape the school curriculum and timetable the best they can. It was an example of how the distribution of resources alone did not fully address the inequality of opportunity since it did not involve "questioning societal arrangements" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 90) that have created or exacerbated the injustice in the first place. In this case, the family had the capital to choose to attend the larger school, which they perceived to have more opportunities for their children. Cuervo (2016) argued that as a result of not questioning the arrangements, the smaller school becomes smaller and has fewer resources – such as the funding tied to enrolments – while the larger school becomes larger and attracts more resources. The availability of resources was tied to the school's ability to provide opportunities and so the systemic injustice was perpetuated with the smaller schools and their communities losing out, unable to adequately compete with larger centres.

7.3.2.1.2. The need for greater access to university campuses.

Sarah drew a direct connection between students' experiences outside of Wyben to their decision-making process when it came to university. As such, she appreciated the subsidies available for her students to access outside opportunities and that the school had been willing to make the most of these by including pathways considerations, like visiting a university on an arts excursion in the city. Accessing campuses was another example of an inequality of opportunity that was likely to be taken for granted by urban schools. It required more resources in time, funding, and transportation for rural students to gain access to a campus. Sarah's opinion of the importance of visiting universities was consistent with the growing body of literature exploring rural student aspirations and transitions to university (see Chapter Two). It can be difficult for students to imagine themselves following an unfamiliar pathway. For example, James (2001) found that a student's distance from a university campus was a discouraging factor in their decision-making process about tertiary education while Fleming and Grace (2017) saw an increase in students' understanding of university and their confidence about their decision with students who participated in a university experience camp. Sarah's belief that rural students need exposure to tertiary institutions were reflected in both of these studies. While Sarah could not change the physical distance to the nearest campus, she could prioritise opportunities to have students engage with universities. Additionally, she had found that her students prefer regional universities as they were a less dramatic change from their life experiences and so less likely to be overwhelmed. Allison and Eversole (2008) explained how regional universities were more likely to utilise place-based knowledge and relationships in order to promote regional development. This suggested that not only would Sarah's students find the campus locations more familiar, they might also experience pedagogy that was more familiar to them. Sarah also considered familiarity with the capital cities as influential to student choice, another reason she continued to support the Melbourne Work Experience Camp and noted that many families visited Adelaide when they holidayed in South Australia. These influence factors spoke to the necessity to ensure rural students were able to access and become familiar with university campuses in order for them to make informed decisions about pursuing tertiary study and various resultant careers.

7.3.2.2. Recognitional justice: A difficult role to understand from the outside.

Sarah's narrative revealed several challenges associated with recognitional justice. She presented a description of pathways advising that required a lived experience in order to understand it. As such, it would be difficult for other stakeholders – students, school staff, parents, community members, educational organisations and policymakers – to fully comprehend. This would suggest a difficulty in garnering a sense of "recognitional justice based on the idea of greater respect for and empowerment of their work" (Cuervo, 2016, p.133) and echoed Douglas' (2010) assertion that professionalism in the career development field cannot be achieved while its members and clients did not have an established understanding. One challenge stemmed from her lack of understanding the role before she began, resulting in learning 'on the job.' This lack of understanding, of not recognising the intricacies of the role, was an example of how the role of a pathways advisor was not well understood by people who have not performed it. Sarah had a detailed role description. She had access to two individuals who had held the position previously and was supported by a senior school team with years of experience in their roles, as well as sharing an office and having a good relationship with a highly experienced education support staff member. Despite this support, she was still unsure of the scope and nature of her role, suggesting that the pathways advising role was open to interpretation and each advisor's understanding. So, while the interpretive nature of the role allowed for tailoring to specific contexts and rural social spaces, it also prevented a clear recognition and understanding of it to a broader audience – perhaps including potential and aspiring pathways advisors.

However, collectively Wyben College seemed to recognise the importance of pathways advising and careers education. While Sarah continued to develop her understanding and responsibilities with her role, she was operating within a local system that valued pathways planning. Her narrative suggested that there seemed to be a strength in numbers at the College that had developed a culture of pathways exploration; this local system had structures in place whose purpose was to ease the burdens caused by an uneven playing field for their students. Working as a social group – the College community – is more effective at lessening the inequalities facing the students than the "individual palliatives" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 97) that result from a single interested party, such as the pathways advisor. Both Cuervo (2016) and Young (1990) argued that to increase recognition and social justice "we should view people as members of a social group and not as individuals" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 97). This interpretation of increasing

social justice focuses on the relationships and differences within the group rather than homogenising members' needs. According to Sarah's narrative, Wyben College had been able to adjust its local structures to best suit their circumstances through a recognition of their school and community's values and priorities around pathways. While this was a positive in Sarah's microcosm of Wyben College, her narrative did not give any indication that this approach was being taken in the macrocosm of policy, but instead positioned the College as the individual administering palliatives. The College's culture of promoting careers exploration and preparation might have been due in part to the three most recent principals having been pathways advisors, including the current principal Ron, who was the College's pathways advisor for four years. Additionally, since the principal had experience and a recognition of the nature of the role, Sarah had support in developing herself as a pathways advisor and was able to create a program suitable for the school. Jenkins, Reitano, and Taylor's (2011) found teachers had a perception that having "access to more experienced teacher mentors within the same rural school" supported their professional growth. In a reflection of these findings, Sarah's narrative included examples of how she worked with Ron and felt comfortable asking for guidance.

7.3.2.3. Associational justice: Finding the place and method to speak up.

Sarah raised concerns about not knowing where or how to make herself heard outside of the College. This prevented her from more fully participating in decisions about her work and revealed associational injustices. Sarah expressed a desire to speak up but had not found the appropriate channels to do so. She also identified that the Network was not meeting her needs as a member. As the Network had the potential to act as a representational voice to policymakers and other educational organisations, Sarah's dissatisfaction with it pointed to several issues. As reported by several other participants, the Network was where they learned how to do this role and was an important source of local knowledge. Sarah wanted access to this knowledge, but did not have the time. A second issue was a failure of the Network to better cater to more members. Sarah's desire for more access and meetings that suited members who did not live in Westfield, raised issues of "power and politics [that can] impact the learning and change… and coalition-building – that happens in and through networks" (Thomas & Niesz, 2012, p.686). The power and politics of the Westfield-based Network have had the effect of making Sarah feel excluded, cutting her off from the professional learning opportunities and the ability to have her voice reflected in its advocacy and direction. Further, it may have had a negative influence on

members' ability to collaborate through the Network, which Muijis (2015) identified as "a very practical way of overcoming" (p. 303) inadequacy in resources due to the small size of rural schools and their distance from services. Despite the support and local knowledge contained within Wyben College, Sarah's perceived isolation from the Network revealed a shortfall in "a critical aspect of social justice in education in terms of whose voice is heard, who gets a chance to participate in the decision-making of state educational… policy design" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 101). As a new pathways advisor, Sarah had a unique voice and perspective on the role – in contrast to the more established advisors who were able to participate – that should be heard and considered in decision-making.

7.4. Summary

Sarah was new to the role of pathways coordinator and so, many of the challenges she identified were related to becoming more familiar with and confident in her work. Her deep connections in the community meant she had a strong understanding of her rural social space and commitment to doing her job well. She identified the multiple connections she had in the community as key motivations for undertaking and improving in her work. Sarah's narrative highlighted a number of positives – such as a strong sense of support and the flexibility to tailor the pathways program – resulting from school leadership and community members understanding the nature of her role. The perspective and experiences Sarah brought to the role were shaped by her sense of being a local. As such, she had an historic and contemporary understanding of the social injustices that faced her students and her community. These centred on issues of access to opportunities, a need to better understand the pathways to future work, and obstacles to participating in decision-making. Notably, Sarah identified difficulties accessing the Network, but still recognised it as a critical source of information and professional support.

Chapter Eight: Gemma: The Leading Teacher

I'm really competitive and I want our kids to have the best outcomes…. the best marks… go to the best courses they can get into. And I want people to look at our program and look at that booklet and say that's good… And country schools… despite the fact that I think the Department [of Education] puts barriers in our way almost on purpose, they make it really impossible… But I still want the community to see that we're for them and that we're an asset for them and that they can send their kids here and we will take their kids' results very seriously.

8.1. Part One: Westfield College's Leading Teacher – Transitions and Pathways

Gemma was a qualified careers advisor. [20] She was not a long-time local and did not express a strong connection to the community, professing to be prepared to move out of the area because of a perceived lack of consistency from the DET. Previously, Gemma had taught overseas in the Middle East and in a different rural Victorian school. She also worked for a decade in a university's Tertiary Information Service (TIS), specialising in rural and regional students. Through that role, she also worked with the Careers Education Association of Victoria (CEAV). Gemma organised her own professional learning opportunities and found it challenging to access external professional development due to commitments to her family, the costs, time, and structure of the opportunities. Weighing up the benefits of a professional development opportunity was also something she reflected on concerning the local careers Network – of which she was the president. She wondered if Network members found the meetings, held at her school, *productive enough* for the travel, understanding if they do not. Adding to her reluctance to attend external professional learning were a number of experiences that she found to be disappointing, and not relevant to her work or context.

[20] Gemma gave her title as Leading Teacher- Transitions and Pathways and referred to others as doing *careers work* or *stuff* or simply *careers*. She calls interviewing students *careers counselling*.

In her role as Leading Teacher, Gemma had a number of tasks. This included subject selections, student exits, tertiary applications, careers counselling, marketing, and organising various careers-related events. Additionally, she taught a Year 12 English class. Gemma oversaw a team of teachers to coordinate the transitions from Year Six into Year Seven then through Year 12. Despite the extensive workload, she loved her job. *I think it's probably the only thing I would want to do and I've thought about, we've thought about, whether we should move and do something else, but I… it's probably the job I've been happiest in my whole life.* She enjoyed that she was able to *embed some vision for doing things differently or 'what's the community want' or 'how can we serve the kids better' and 'how can we make sure they are prepared for Year 12 earlier?* An aspect of the role Gemma particularly enjoyed were the relationships she built with students, but admitted to struggling with the students who were apathetic to their career planning. *I want to help the kids who want to save themselves. And that's a philosophical line that I've got that's different from some of the people who have different roles... I want to help the kids who… are prepared to sort of meet you halfway.* Gemma said this was partly due to the time constraints she felt as she juggled the various elements of her workload. She also identified a number of examples where she felt that the DET had negatively affected her ability to do her job properly, including through poor communication. One example she gave about how poor communication made it more difficult meet expectations included short notice given to complete census paperwork during one of the busiest times of the year. Gemma considered many of their demands to be compliance measures, box-ticking, and she believed that this was getting worse.

8.1.1. School context.

Gemma was accountable to the school's Annual Implantation Plan (henceforth AIP), so the principal had given her a time allowance for careers-related work. She pointed out that time allowances could be a problem at other schools; some pathways advisors she knew did not have any time given to them, including some at larger city schools. *There is MIPs funding that is supposed to fund that program and that's dishonest. And it's not right. It's not right to take the money and say 'now you do careers out of [the]… goodness of your own heart.'* Despite having time, she still found it difficult to balance her pathways responsibilities with her Year 12 English class. She placed the highest priority on her Year 12s and cited them as a factor for why she had never gone on the Melbourne Work Experience Camp and was reluctant to organise other out-of-

school activities. Gemma highlighted the importance the school placed on having strong data on student achievements, in part because it is used in marketing the school to parents of potential families and to existing families to keep their children enrolled.

As a Leading Teacher, Gemma managed people who were responsible for various aspects of pathways and senior school. There were separate staff members for each of: Work Experience, VCAL and school-based apprentices, Year Nine and 10 careers curriculum and the Expo excursion, VET, and pathways and transitions in Alternate Programs (re-engagement program). She explained that not all staff, or community members, understood the importance of career planning. She described the need to convince staff to *buy in* and the consequences when they did not. Gemma explained that Westfield College used its MIPs funding in part to fund homeroom – a short session each morning where teachers undertook attendance and other administrative tasks with a set of students – where students were meant to continue their career planning. However, some staff refused to do it, meaning the school had lost funding. There was also an annual argument about where the careers curriculum fit within the school.

Gemma had concerns about careers education programs at other schools because of how open it was to interpretation. She cited her predecessor's program and the changes she had made despite working within the same context. Then she wondered how different programs must be in other schools. *I think there's a fair bit of floundering. The programs are so different and so inconsistent… You sort of feel like we're all doing sort of the same job and in a way we are, but the difference is vast. And a lot of that stuff we inherit because it's historical or it's local or it's political, but we do run really different programs.* While she noted the variance was necessary to suit different contexts, she voiced some concern about the potential quality of programs.

Gemma acknowledged that the College would not be as successful and she would not be as happy in her role if it were not for their principal, Mark. She considered the strong leadership a factor in her job satisfaction as well as saving enrolments and being competitive. When Mark was appointed, the school needed to make improvements in how they responded to community needs, which included their careers preparation program. She had built a strong relationship with Mark which had allowed her to develop her role and responsibilities more easily.

8.2. Regional and Rural School Challenges

Gemma identified a number of pathways-related challenges that faced regional and rural schools. These centred on student aspirations, obstacles faced by small schools, and a misunderstanding of rural areas from education organisations.

8.2.1. Lack of access and increasing opportunities.

From a pathways' perspective, Gemma worried that regional and rural students struggled to understand the VCE was a competition and that they were not exposed to as many opportunities or choices in work futures as urban students may be. She thought they tended to lack an understanding of the competitive nature of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) system, which could lead to limited pathway options when their results were not what they expected nor required. Another limiting factor was the lack of opportunities accessible to students. Locally, students saw *nursing or teaching or accounting or engineering because that's the jobs people have here. But you can't talk to them necessarily about biotechnologies or… media stuff… the more artistic stuff or some of the new emerging careers that people in Westfield don't have.* She found that some students change their university courses once they get on-campus and are exposed to other, more appealing career pathways.

Part of Gemma's role was to help students access more opportunities, but she encountered a number of hurdles. For example, she found it difficult to organise excursions for her students due to restrictions on her time, onerous paperwork, costs and travel times to events, and some teachers' reluctance to give up class time. However, she still felt pressure to do so. Gemma was often approached by different subject teachers who wanted her to organise an excursion in their field, but she needed to balance these requests within her budget, time constraints, larger pathways exploration program, against other teachers' requests for excursions and to not have their classes interrupted, and student interests. She described student apathy as a constant challenge, which had led to excursions being cancelled. *I'm not going to spend 20 hours organising an event for 80 kids if five will go, so that's really disappointing. But you work to what the kids need and what they want and so I think bringing people onto campus is the best or just having stuff here.* Also, despite the pressure from some teachers to take students on excursions, many, including herself, would be angry at missing class time. *A lot of… the grants*

and the free things that are offered, are in Melbourne and for us to get our kids to Melbourne… I'm not taking kids out of school for two… days and I don't have the budget for it. One excursion that did happen each year, regardless of whether Gemma herself attended, was the Melbourne Work Experience Camp for Year 11s to expose them to a wider variety of careers.

Another major obstacle Gemma had in broadening students' potential career aspirations were family expectations. *A lot of our kids are first in family to go to uni- the majority are, more so than kids I've taught elsewhere*. Gemma identified that many of the parents did not have a current understanding of work futures and so could be resistant to the strategies their children needed for success. She had found it was *more specific to the country that the kids think, 'I need to know what job I'll be in in 10 years.' And of course, we know… it doesn't work like that. They're going to have seven career changes and 20 job changes… but they don't get it. And I think the parents want that security too… The world doesn't work like that. The kids here are very protected… They don't see it. And they don't read the paper so they don't see what's happening in the rest of the world in terms of labour… But the parents too, because the parents were, particularly in the country, parents were a generation where they left school and they got a job and they're still in those same career fields… A lot of them… have reasonable jobs, but a lot of them say be a nurse, be a teacher because… that's what's available to girls here… So, you have all these kids doing nursing and teaching, whereas their counterparts in Melbourne are not applying for those courses necessarily in the same proportions.* Gemma highlighed a number of issues around raising student aspirations, but specifically focused on the influence of parents, visible options locally, and expressed concerns over the gendered nature of aspirations.

8.2.2. Problems facing small schools.

Gemma acknowledged that Westfield College was a large school for the area and as such, experienced these challenges differently to the smaller schools in the area. For Gemma, one downside of working in a bigger school was not having relationships with all of the parents, especially those whom she considered would benefit from updated careers information. She summarised some of the difficulties she thought smaller schools faced in aligning funding to match school priorities, student needs, and breaking traditions. Gemma saw the need for smaller schools to be flexible in their senior school delivery in order to better cater to their students' aspirations. Also, Gemma thought *it's really interesting because Westfield kids get the same [Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS)]as [other local schools'] kids… [but] have better*

resources. They have better access to teachers and better access to subjects and they get the same amount of SEAS… It's up to 10 points automatically, just on regional status... But really, I don't know that they're as disadvantaged. She explained that difference in disadvantage was not recognised by Special Entry Access Scheme and other equity programs designed to help level the playing field for regional and rural students applying to university (for more information on SEAS, see Section 8.3.2.2.). Gemma also expressed concerns about how many rural educators had to perform a number of different duties in small schools and saw a relationship between the numbers of roles assigned to a person and how successfully they were able to complete them. She gave examples of herself needing to balance teaching requirements with her advising role, other pathways advisors not being given any time allowance for their role, and principals being required to have a teaching load on top of their other responsibilities. Gemma framed these issues as results of the DET not understanding the challenges of working in a rural context.

8.2.3. Misunderstanding rural.

Gemma considered many of these issues to be exacerbated by metropolitan-based education organisations, such as the DET and the CEAV, not understanding the needs and contexts of regional and rural schools. She thought regional and rural school visibility could be a matter of external priorities and other organisations' good intentions were not always helpful or appreciated. *I delete … all those emails that come through inviting us to go to things in* ***regional*** *Reservoir, Ringwood, and Coburg [suburbs of Melbourne, at least 4 hours away], I just delete them.* Gemma shared an anecdote that epitomised the problems she had encountered with these organisations, namely poor communication resulting in a poor understand of what the school actually needed. *The Department gave them [CEAV] a mailing list that was years out of date. So, we hosted… [an event] but my kids weren't even invited. I found out by accident.* She went on to express annoyance with the sporadic attention paid to them through initiatives like pilot programs that are then not continued. *Make your kids do this. Get your parents to attend this. Run this. Send all your kids to this. But it's sort of disjointed, short notice … it's not done in any consultation about what does your community need. 'There's a problem, let's chuck some money at it and we'll ignore you again for another 12 months.' And I feel like that is their way of ticking their boxes, their compliance boxes, but they don't actually give a shit about anything that we do out here.* Gemma was frustrated with the demands placed on her by organisations

that were supposed to support her and her students but did not take into account the specific needs of her community.

8.3. Part Two: Discussion

Utilising the analytical frames of Reid et al.'s (2010) rural social space and Cuervo's (2016) pluralistic sense of social justice, the data revealed issues such as the need to raise student aspirations, the lack of access to resources and opportunities, and misunderstandings about pathways planning. While these issues also faced smaller rural schools, the size of Gemma's relatively large regional school served as a distinguishing factor.

8.3.1. Rural social space.

Many of Gemma's stories were situated within her school and her work did not seem to extend into the community. While Gemma did not express many personal experiences in/with her rural social space, she did discuss issues specific to her rural social space around not feeling supported by policymakers, the approach she took to framing the Stay/ Leave career options, and the importance of supporting families in the tertiary application process.

8.3.1.1. Policy support for rural teachers.

In her narrative, Gemma did not discuss strong links to her community – professionally or personally. She was not a local to the region. While she mentioned her willingness to move on from Westfield, she attributed this to her feelings toward the DET rather than a dislike of the area. Boylan and McSwan's (1998) argued "that long-staying rural teachers are satisfied with their career in teaching" (p. 62) and that they stay in part because of the support they feel from the community and because they enjoy a rural lifestyle. This was similar to what Gemma reported – she liked teaching and raising her family in a regional town, but she did not feel supported by the DET. She cited the DET as the reason she may leave Westfield, which was problematic since there have been continued calls in the literature for more of a focus on rural teacher staffing policies (Downes & Roberts, 2018). A number of the problems with the DET that Gemma cited were related to issues of recognitional justice which are further explored

below. However, McConaghy (2006) posits that while the turnover rate of staff in rural schools may persist, there are positives such as "teacher transience may indeed be necessary for teacher learning and the generation of new pedagogical and leadership knowledge" (p. 54). The new-to-Westfield knowledge that Gemma brought with her into the role had been helpful in re-branding the College and assisted students' navigation through the university application and course selection processes.

8.3.1.2. A team approach to the Stay/Leave pathways advising.

The data showed that Gemma was not the only person responsible for providing pathways advice at Westfield College. She led a team of teachers, each of whom had their own speciality areas – for example, Gemma said she did not have a strong understanding of VET and VCAL because another team member was responsible for those programs. The 'luxury' of having multiple advisors in the school seemed related to Westfield College's relatively large size. While Gemma coordinated the entire team, her focus was on the university-bound students. In the stories she shared, her prioritisation of these students appeared to perpetuate the notion that in order to be successful, students must leave, something Corbett and Forsey (2017) explicitly warned against. They argued that "the meritocratic assumptions built in to contemporary discourses around raising the aspirations of spatially, culturally, and socially marginal populations makes corollary assumptions about the availability of 'knowledge' work which is locally accessible" (p. 441). Despite the availability 'knowledge' work locally, Gemma seemed to frame local career options as traditional, historically-secure employment with gendered expectations. She presented these pathways as something that she needed to educate students and parents to think beyond. The literature suggests that this discourse may be harmful to the long-term outlook of the school community and its students. For example, Carr and Kefalas (2009) argued that rural students tend to be sorted into the Achievers and Stayers while at school and this can have a negative cumulative effect on the sustainability of the community by pitting the groups against each other. Animosity can grow if the Stayers consider the Achievers to be benefiting from more attention and resources and if Achievers look down on the aspirations and pathways of the Stayers. Corbett (2007) also explored the implications when communities equate mobility with making the 'right' choices and only the 'losers' remain. Granting that Gemma's speciality area in the advising team was university-bound students, her framing of local work may have been problematic if it affected her coordination of the team.

As part of her role to support university-bound students, Gemma identified the need to update rural parents' knowledge on pathways and the future of work in order to maximise the effectiveness of advice to students. Her discussion of the need to include parents was similar to Tieken's (2016) findings that rural guidance counsellors' work is "shaped by their understanding of parents' values and fears" (p. 216). This implies something of a two-way street – parents, especially those whose children are first-generation university students, need to engage with the pathways advisor for more information. The pathways advisors also need to engage more with those parents. Gemma indicated that this communication could be improved at Westfield College.

8.3.2. Social justice.

Gemma's description of her role revealed a number of ideas related to issues of social justice. She raised concerns about the lack of distributed justice due to the challenges of accessing adequate resources and opportunities for her students. Many of her stories centred on the implications of poor recognitional justice with what she considered to be widespread misunderstanding of careers education/ pathways advising and the challenges of rural education, especially by policymakers. Finally, she also expressed concerns related to the functioning of professional support organisations like the CEAV and the local Network, which indicated insufficient associational justice.

8.3.2.1. Distributive justice: The need for local context to be considered in the redistribution of resources and opportunities.

Several aspects of Gemma's work involved addressing the inequality of opportunity experienced by her students. Gemma discussed the challenges in accessing resources and opportunities outside of the school. This aligned with Cuervo's (2016) findings that rural teachers' view of social justice, while pluralistic, most often identified "an urgent need for a better redistributions of material goods… [and that this] most favoured… dimension of social justice" (p. 133) was presented in terms of needing equality of opportunity and access to resources. Gemma's explanations of *why* there was a need for better redistribution could also be seen in Cuervo's (2016) findings that rural teachers expressed the necessity for greater recognitional and associational justice in order to adequately address the inequalities of

opportunities. This is similar to Gemma's description of the paradoxical problem involved with attending subsidized or free events targeted at rural students – the events themselves were free but she did not have the budget for the associated travel, accommodation, and time out of school costs. The providers then got frustrated there was not a higher participation rate when they brought events to rural areas, so fewer opportunities were offered in the future. Gemma presented the providers as thinking that if they hold an event in any regional/ rural town, then it will be more accessible to all the regional/ rural students. From a school's perspective, it may have been cheaper and easier – for example the ability to utilise public transport – to access the capital city rather than a regional town, especially if the town was not the 'local' regional hub[21]. This was an example of the fundamental misunderstanding and mis-conceptualising of rural from a metrocentric standpoint. By viewing regional/ rural as simply not being urban, it ignored important considerations of things like distance from services (Thomson, 2000) and retained – if not exacerbated – the underlying financial problems caused by location. Gemma's characterisation of the external providers reflected her belief that they saw rural schools as items on a list of places that existed somewhere outside of the city. Her description of the frustrations they have voiced to her revealed that they had little understanding of the geographic location of the school, never mind the specific needs of its context. This resulted in the organisations being of little help to her students and created more work for her to 'translate' their resources, or attempts, into something more locally relevant. As a result, she reported frequently not finding it worth her effort to do so, particularly given the limited resource of time.

One of the key careers-related resources allocated to schools was their MIPs funding. Gemma's narrative included evidence that while the College's ability to use the funding as they deemed necessary in their context – a positive step towards improved distributive justice – this autonomy had not resolved the underlying systemic issues that deepen the injustices. As Keddie (2017) stated, injustices can continue to exist under the surface of claims of greater social justice afforded through school autonomy and its purpose to enhance student outcomes. She argued that the policy discourse of school autonomy was "presented in progressive terms in its apparent alignment with equity and justice goals" (p. 377) which may promote and hinder improved social justice. In other words, simply framing the ability of schools to decide for themselves how best

[21] The major roads, rails and bus lines in Victoria connect to Melbourne like spokes on a wagon wheel. This can make it more difficult, time consuming, and expensive to travel between the 'spokes' rather than directly into the capital city.

to spend their funding did not necessarily alleviate the larger societal injustices. In Gemma's narrative, she described how the principal distributed the limited MIPs funding across various aspects of the school. However, these funds did not solve the inequalities of opportunities facing her students. For example, she explained that the funds subsidised time release for the advising team and time for careers education in homeroom, but there was not enough to cover the costs of accessing activities outside of the school, like the Melbourne Work Experience Camp. So, while the partial financial autonomy was preferable, it could not fix the challenges presented by, for example, geographic location. The number of obstacles to opportunities in Gemma's narrative suggested that the funding was inadequate, regardless of how the College chose to spend it.

8.3.2.2. Recognitional justice: A significant source of frustration.

In analysing Gemma's narrative, it became clear that she attributed many of the issues affecting her work to other educators and urban-based policymakers not understanding what she did or her context.

Gemma's discussion revealed that she believed there was a widespread misunderstanding of careers education, pathways advising, and rural education by people who were not directly involved. It is of note that the deficit discourse around these roles did not just originate from urban contexts. Gemma herself occasionally expressed concerns and critiques of the surrounding smaller schools in oversimplified terms. These misunderstandings were examples of poor recognitional justice. Cuervo (2016) discussed recognitional justice as being concerned with identity and differences, and so 'recognising' the distinct traits of an individual or group. Misrecognition of an identity "has the capacity to produce harm and generate forms of oppression with the subsequent effect of diminishing a mode of being" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 91-92). The misrecognition of careers advisors, Douglas (2010) argued, resulted in a lack of understanding and respect. Douglas highlighted that the problems around misunderstanding careers advisors began at a base-level of inconsistences in titles and that "these semantic problems focus on communication [of] what the job is" (p. 29). This uncertainty of the nature of the role existed within the practicing community and so logically affects outsiders' ability to understand it. Gemma expressed deep concerns about how other schools understand pathways advising, which echoed Douglas' (2010) identification of the lack of consistency within the profession. Gemma worried about the variation in programs, coupled with misinformation,

especially when it seemed to be the pathways advisor who lacked a clear understanding of the role.

In relation to careers education within her school, Gemma talked about the challenges of selling careers to staff in order to assist in accomplishing tasks linked to funding levels, annually fighting over where careers education should sit in the curriculum, and differences in teachers' expectations of her role. Notably, Gemma highlighted that the school lost some of its MIPs funding for the next year because some teachers did not carry out the careers planning activities to be conducted in homeroom –which is funded by the same money. A further example of the misunderstanding of her role by other staff was the number of teachers both wanting her to take students on subject-specific careers-related excursions and also to not interrupt their class time. However, on a positive note, Gemma considered her principal to be supportive. She had time release, there were careers education classes, and MIPs funding was used for pathways-related tasks.

Gemma provided examples of how people who were not from a rural area struggled to fully understand the challenges facing rural schools. This often resulted in an approach to equity "that does not take into account the particularity of rural places… and instead, conceives of rural schools and communities as having broadly the same needs as metropolitan schools" (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 767). Roberts (2014) further argued that there was a prevalent view that the rural is a homogenous place that simply exists outside of urban areas. This could result in perspectives and polices that view all rural areas as having the same problems to the same degree. One example of how a metrocentric system had misunderstood the nuances of regional, rural, and remote was when it oversimplified statistics. Gemma referred to an element of the SEAS Category One consideration that "applies to applicants who have a permanent address in a regional, remote or under-represented area or have undertaken secondary study at a school in a regional or remote area" (VTAC, 2019, Living or School Location section, para. 1). While each participating tertiary institution could place additional restrictions – some did differentiate between regional and rural or remote – generally this criterion was met by students entering their address and ticking a box indicating their wish to apply for the consideration. Category One used the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) Remoteness Areas classification determined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which in 2016, classified Westfield the same as the rural schools around it. Gemma expressed that she thought it was unfair since her students would benefit from it more than the students in smaller schools with fewer resources.

Gemma elaborated on other examples of how the size and location of Westfield reduced the challenges to accessing opportunities, but did not eliminate them. Most of these centred on the need, or lack thereof, to travel for opportunities like students' VET participation or advisors' professional learning. These persistent obstacles were somewhat alleviated for Gemma due to her location in the regional centre, but that they continue raised concerns about how the system understands and responds to the needs of rural teachers and schools in varied contexts. Rural teacher concerns over accessing professional development and the important role it has for retention has been raised for decades (Boylan et al., 1993), pointing towards a continuing systemic injustice.

Gemma's single biggest source of frustration when it came to not understanding the work and contexts of pathways advisors and rural schools was the DET. The DET was positioned to cause the most harm in misrecognising the work of its teachers and principals as it was in an established position of power as their employer. It can therefore be perceived as part of the system perpetuating the injustice. As Cuervo (2016) stated, "oppression and domination are sustained through processes and structures, through silent works of institutions… it is reproduced by social processes and the role of institutions, which privilege some social groups over others" (p. 92). Gemma described three instances of the DET 'privileging' urban school contexts by not recognising the particularities of rural schools – overburdening teaching principals, not providing relevant professional learning, and not supporting teachers to remain in a rural school. Her descriptions of these problems placed rural schools in a disadvantaged position, which created additional obstacles for them to achieve success. While these issues were not directly related to pathways advising, there were ripple effects that impacted on pathways. Overburdened principals may not have had time to upskill themselves on the importance of pathways. A lack of relevant professional development opportunities may have prevented advisors from keeping up to date in careers education and/or pathway requirements. Finally, if teachers did not feel supported to stay in rural areas then it could limit the accumulated local knowledge necessary to be an effective pathways advisor.

Gemma's distrust and anger at the Department ran throughout her interview and she connected it to many aspects of her work. From her role in the school's leadership team, she was able to see the effects of the DET's lack of understanding of the principal's workload. She considered the DET's expectations to be even more unrealistic when it came to small school principals who had a teaching load on top of their principal responsibilities. Cornish and Jenkins (2015) asserted that there is a misconception – a misrecognition – that rural school principalship

is simply a scaled down version of urban principalship. They identified principals with a teaching load as it having "an impact in multiple ways on their ability to perform their roles" (p. 136) as they were still required to complete all of the administration work and leadership duties – both in and out of school (Wildy & Clarke, 2012) – in addition to their teaching responsibilities. So, it may not be only rural school principals whose role is misunderstood and under-appreciated, but rural school leaders, such as Gemma, as well.

A final element of Gemma's frustration with the DET was the quality and suitability of the professional learning opportunities they provided, some of which were mandatory. She did not consider many of the professional learning events she has attended to be useful or applicable to her context and resented the time and expense to attend. Gemma also linked her negative feelings toward the DET, specifically their lack of professional support, as a reason why she had not developed a strong sense of connection to her community. While Gemma described ways in which her previous experiences had shaped her pathways advising work in a positive manner, this sentiment spoke to an additional significant challenge for recruitment and retention of staff in regional and rural schools (see Section 8.3.1.1.).

8.3.2.3. Associational justice: Potential not being met.

Gemma raised two issues that related to associational justice – both of which pointed to shortcomings on the part of the CEAV and the local Network. Firstly, she did not hold the CEAV, a body with a role to speak on behalf of, and work to improve, careers development in the state, in much regard. This was similar to her view on the DET and how it performed its role. The example of them holding a careers event at her school without her prior knowledge demonstrated a disconnect that she believed to be harmful to her students. It also was a failure, at least in this case, to include rural pathways advisors meaningfully. While regional and rural-based pathways advisors were likely to be a minority within the CEAV membership, a basic tenet of associational justice called for "participants… [to be] heard and respected, even through conflict and difference, without having to sacrifice their particularities" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 101) and to have genuine control over the conditions that affect their lives. If the CEAV was not communicating with the pathways advisor at the school hosting an event, it raised questions about how/if they were consulting with rural members generally. A further example that Gemma gave regarding their lack of consultation and understanding of context was that she deleted many of the emails they sent before reading them, considering whatever they were promoting to be

irrelevant or impractical. She expressed frustration with the lack of consultation and with feeling ignored, which she found disappointing and worrisome from the organisation whose mandate it was to help ensure quality career development and to advocate for its members.

Secondly, Gemma presented the local careers Network as not working ideally in terms of its function as an avenue for pathways advisors to further shape and better understand their roles. The Network had the potential to be a key source for improving associational justice in that local professionals could collaborate to improve their practice and to act as a collective voice to speak to other stakeholders like the CEAV. However, Gemma voiced a concern that the meetings may not be worth the time and associated costs of attending them. This may have indicated that the Network was not functioning effectively either as a source of professional learning or as a means for improving associational justice. Cuervo (2016) argued that associational justice is the "right for individuals or groups to fully participate in the decisions that affect their conditions" (p. 103). If members were not attending the meetings – not able to participate in them – because the costs in time and resources are were outweighing the perceived benefits, then members lost their voice in the Network, its direction and priorities. Fewer members may also have resulted in the Network losing its power to advocate effectively on their behalf through a diminished collective voice and without broadly informed priorities.

8.4. Summary

Gemma's narrative described experiences in her rural social space and issues of social justice through the lens of a larger regional, rather than a smaller rural, school. Gemma's work in her rural social space seemed to be influenced by her appreciation for a rural lifestyle if not a long-term connection to her community. Her work as the Leading Teacher: Pathways and Transitions positioned her to have an impact on the future of her community through her framing of the possibilities of locally available careers in addition to her focus on preparing students for university. Many of the stories she told about her experiences included instances of social injustices. While Gemma wanted more resources and fewer obstacles to accessing outside career exploration opportunities, most of the problems she identified stemmed from poor recognitional justice. She suggested that it was difficult for an outsider to understand pathways advising or rural education if they had not had firsthand experience. Finally, Gemma also expressed

concerns about the role of educational organisations – including the Network – fully involving their rural members which had resulted in shortcomings of associational justice.

Chapter Nine: Sally: Make Something of Nothing

Where does it start and stop, that you apply the same… amounts of adversity in a different situation, what would the outcome be? Like for example… kids in rural Australia who are isolated? Kids in the outback, given the same opportunities as these kids, what would the outcome be? And I know again, there's a whole other set of barriers and hurdles, but there's still barriers and hurdles nonetheless… I just don't know what more we can do. And … that's OK because we can then sleep at night knowing we've tried everything we can. But you still then question, well if we've done everything we can, what happens next? … This is our community. So, we've got to do our bit to make something of nothing. And the future is just either going to be more bleak or more productive and we'll just have to wait and see.

9.1. Part One: Westfield College's Pathways and Transitions: Alternate Programs

The Alternate Programs was a set of re-engagement programs for at-risk students, and as of time of the interview, the only one of its kind in the region with most schools too small to sustain such a program. It was located in its own building on Westfield College's campus. Within Alternate Programs, Sally assisted students with their Work Experience, wrote school policies about student transitions into and out of Alternate Programs, and had broadened data collection. However, after 18 months in the role, she felt so burnt out that she had requested a transfer to the mainstream section of the College, regardless of whether or not she could continue in careers education.

Since Sally stressed the importance of outsiders understanding the context of Alternate Programs and how it affected her work, her description is included here.

9.1.1. Alternate Programs' structure and students.

When Sally was hired, Alternate Programs was in a period of transition. There was a significant turnover in staff, which included program leaders, but the assistant principal remained a constant. *There was a major investment in terms of staff to make change... attendance,*

outcomes, student outcomes, and transitions. So, that's where we were investing heavily… Alternate Programs was very much viewed as a welfare drop-in priority instead of an educational priority, so our work was definitely cut out for us. Part of this transition was their inclusion into the AIP.

Sally explained Alternate Programs consisted of five programs and described their student cohort. *Our students range from 13-21 years old… we've got a lot of Indigenous students. In terms of females to males, it depends on what program… So, I'd say the split is relatively half and half… Ninety-five percent… of our students are where one parent is unemployed… when you think of re-engagement, they [outsiders] make assumptions automatically that most likely are correct, so huge amounts of substance abuse, trauma, and in and out of the courts, very low levels of attendance at school throughout their life, inter-generational poverty or situational poverty… all those factors… They come and go. A lot of them might move away, then come back two months later… we're 18% of Westfield College's student population.* Sally pointed out that there were more students enrolled in Alternate Programs than in many of the rural schools in the region. She detailed some of the reasons for this which included relatively high rates of teenage pregnancies, drug use, and crime.

9.1.1.1. Coming into the role.

Sally never expected to be in such a role. She had been a primary school teacher and after taking time to travel overseas, she returned to casual relief teaching (CRT) work. The principal offered her the role despite her lack of careers or secondary school qualification, and she accepted without knowing what the role entailed. Sally regularly attended the Network meetings even though she found them unhelpful, given the needs of her students. *It's a fair old jump from primary to secondary… to disengagement… to careers… I just go on gut instinct. But I've got good people around me and… excellent leadership. I wouldn't be here if [that] wasn't there.* One of the first things she learned on the job was how necessary it was to change her expectations of the role. *I would say my priories have changed since I've been here, because mainly I came in very naïve, unaware, uninformed, inexperienced, all those things… I originally thought… I would just do their MIPs [Managed Individual Pathways] or their Career Action Plan, get them all a part-time job, get them their Learner's [permit], their birth certificate, just get them all those little things. Little did I know those little things are* ***massive things****… So, I*

soon learned that they were great ambitions to have and there's just one pivotal vital ingredient … the students don't necessarily want what I want to get for them.

Sally explained she found it difficult to help students set and achieve similar goals to mainstream students because of the challenges they faced in their lives; their ambitions and understanding of work were dramatically different to hers. She soon realised many of the goals she had for her students were inappropriate because *these kids don't have a telephone number… [or] a bank account because they don't have a birth certificate.* She also identified the importance of students having determination to reach their goals. Sally summed up her job frankly. *I don't want to sound like a bitter twisted person because there's so much that I've learnt… it sounds so crass, but my job is the epitome of pushing shit uphill. How am I meant to get these kids as contributing members of society?*

Sally's role was governed by Westfield College's AIP. She credited Mark, the College's principal with this positive step forward. Many of the tasks involved with her role were tied explicitly to the AIP. She also had been writing school policies that dealt with the attendance and outcomes in Alternate Programs. These included a policy regarding student transitions within the College between mainstream and the various programs of Alternate Programs and the creation of a new database. This database included more detailed information than was gathered by the Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS)[22] and required by the Computerised Administrative System Environment for Schools (CASES).[23] The database provided the school with clearer understanding of their students, their needs, and their outcomes. This data also assisted in justifying their programs and need for resources, especially to the DET. The largest policy she had been involved in concerned the exit process from Alternate Programs. This had involved an audit of students who were listed as being enrolled but were not attending school. Since the school received funding for each student enrolled, and students received Centrelink[24] payments if they were enrolled, there needed to be an accurate accounting of them. *My efforts have been concentrate[ed] in… a word that springs to mind is* ***miraculously****, find these students to exit them, to find them a pathway, a transition process, so that we can exit them knowing full well that there's some sort of positive outcome for them… We can't exit students unless there's a*

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[22] VASS is the system used to track senior school student results, enrolments, and certificates.

[23] CASES is the system that Victorian public schools use to monitor and support reporting, enrolments, student finances, and other administrative data.

[24] Welfare payments distributed by the Australian Government Department of Human Services.

positive pathway. That's a…hard job. These kids are untraceable. Despite the importance of exiting these students, Sally was frustrated at the amount of resources and efforts devoted to a small subset of the cohort. She was confident that by the end of the year they would be able to spend more resources on the current students. While Sally acknowledged that Alternate Programs was well-resourced, she had to balance her priorities with others within the program. *Are we going to focus on meeting unit outcomes? Or are we going to focus on things that the youth justice people should be doing… You've just got to weigh up whose priority is what.* With such a difficult job, Sally maintained that there needed to be a consensus as to where to focus efforts and resources.

Sally's priority was to give students *every opportunity I can… to expose them as much as possible to that working world that they have no idea about, that they've never been introduced to, they've never had exposure to.* To accomplish this, her day-to-day activities consisted of a cycle of *endless chasing people* for involvement, approval, and support. This included emails and in-person meetings. Sally found this aspect of her work frustrating since the collaborative nature of these processes can take months before a task is considered complete. While she was able to develop career exploration activities that she considered relevant to her students, she also said she had very few opportunities to follow-though on these decisions on her own since they involved a number of people, including what Sally referred to as unreliable students.

One of the career exploration activities that Sally had developed was a revised Work Experience model that better suited the needs of her students and employers. She described herself as a *broker* and the *meat in a sandwich* between the students and employers as students rotated through different workplaces one day a week instead of the traditional five consecutive days in one placement. She had to clarify in writing the expectations with employers, who tended to be familiar with the mainstream context of Work Experience. *It's a lot of work because we have to do all the paperwork, all the running around, and we sometimes have to send a staff member with the students while they're completing it... it's very resource heavy for just a week's Work Experience.* Despite the heavy resourcing and strong communication, it was a precarious system. *When things go south, the opportunities that are presented to students [disappear] and you burn bridges that you've established and worked very hard to establish within the community.* She also struggled to decide which students to take a chance on, when the relationships with employers were delicate. *You become very wary of what you're actually going to put yourself out for, who you're going to put yourself out for, and you do question a lot of things… you've got to just keep providing opportunities for students because you never know*

which one is actually going to make a difference… do you set it up knowing full well it's not going to pan out the way that it should at the cost of future students? Sally reinforced that providing an accessible Work Experience program was important since most of her students came from families with high unemployment rates and this was an opportunity for them to experience and explore various career pathways.

Finally, Sally stressed the importance of good school leadership, not just for the support in her role and Alternate Programs, but also as a teacher. *I've stayed at my jobs purely and simply because my principal, my leaders were outstanding.* She considered herself lucky to have had such good leaders across her career and highly rated Mark as Westfield College's principal. She credited his balance of leadership and management in the various sections of the school. *There's delegation. There's equal say. There's group participation of feedback.* She appreciated that he had included Alternate Programs into the school's AIP, a move she considered a positive step toward formalising, improving, and recognising the programs within the College. Sally also specifically praised the assistant principal for his support as she transitioned into this unfamiliar and challenging role. Sally explained how school leadership had led efforts that raised the profile of Alternate Programs in and out of the school community.

9.2. Importance of Publicity

The context and content of Alternate Programs framed the work Sally did. She made multiple references to the impacts of people not understanding or knowing about Alternate Programs. She believed it was important that people knew what Alternate Programs was and she frequently interrupted herself to fully explain relevant elements. She had never heard of it before she was hired to work there. Being involved with Alternate Programs changed her personal priorities and she had developed a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that faced her students. She found that when people understood Alternate Programs, they tended to view it more favourably and recognised it as necessary.

9.2.1. Successes of increased publicity.

Sally noted that *our publicity just keeps increasing, so it's good. And that is because we've got, and I've said a bazillion times, we've got amazing leadership… So, it's good now*

because we're making sure people are aware of us… because there's so many people who wouldn't have had a clue who we were. This involved her communication with potential worksites for her revised Work Experience model, her work that clarified the transition process of mainstream students who *were being dumped over here like rubbish, just dumped on the ground*, and presentations made to community organisation such as Rotary Club.

The most vital target of this publicity was the DET because of the intense scrutiny over the number of students in their programs. *It's only been in recent [months]… that the Department has firsthand seen, experienced, and been presented* with detailed information about the work and scope of Alternate Programs. She defined scrutiny as threats to *shut us down… why are our numbers so big? … Either mainstream is doing their job very poorly so our numbers are so big, or we're doing our job very poorly because there's not kids transitioning back to mainstream.* Sally pointed out that was partly why she had created the more detailed database on their students.

However, there had been a recent major improvement that resulted in an advocate within the DET. *The SEIL's [senior educational improvement leader] boss... He came to our advisor committee meeting unannounced. We just so happened to be presenting our AIP progress which looks really good… He just happened to be there, and he said quote 'it's the first time I've walked out of any meeting with more answers than questions… I'm now an advocate for you guys and I will make sure the Department will have a chance to hear what you have to say and present your story… from where you've started to where you are now.' Because… we have exactly the same AIP emphases as mainstream, it's just applied to us and in our context, so that's been a huge outcome… Oh an* ***advocate****! Because you can understand why there's questions asked, but… we tell a compelling story, what we do, why we do [it], and how we do it now only because of the vision of our leaders.* Sally also framed this positive development as a result of the work the staff had undertaken as part of the process of overhauling transitions.

9.2.2. Defining and measuring success in Alternate Programs.

Sally drew a connection between the increase in good publicity and the formalisation of Alternate Programs with contextualised definitions of success. Their AIP goals were similar to mainstream's but were tailored to suit their students. One example she gave was about student outcomes in the VCAL program. *It may be at a ridiculously extremely frustratingly slow pace,*

but they're achieving. This was also tied to her work on improved data collection and management; not only did this additional tracking assist them in helping their students but served as a justification of Alternate Programs. *We've got a transition profile which is their eligibility report to show have they finished a VCAL certificate, if not how much. We've got a tiered transition profile that shows minimum expectations i.e. have they got a bank account, their L's, a resume. There's about five checklist items. The second tier is academic expectations, what have they achieved in terms of the VCAL completion, and the third tier… it's ranked against importance, the third tier is job readiness. Have they done a VET course? Have they done Work Experience? Have they had a part-time job?* This data was used in the exit meetings with the principal to determine if students can be exited and unenrolled from the College. Students could also use their profile to help secure work post-school.

Sally noted that while it was important to be able to describe their success in recognisable terms to outsiders, she saw great value in recognising the different types of success in Alternate Programs. In a job that was *frustrating* and *cynical,* she found this helpful. *We want our kids to pay taxes… We've got a couple of students who got part-time jobs on their own. Students who have stuck it out and got a Certificate. It's taken them a long time, but they got it. A student who doesn't have drugs for a week… A student who could only work in a room by herself, now can be in a classroom with others. Like, they're the wins… I've learned to adapt my measures of success and when those wins come along, which isn't often, it's really good when they do happen.* However, the daily obstacles she faced in her work often outweighed the positives and had accumulated in her over time.

9.3. Burnout

Despite the optimism she expressed for the Alternate Programs, Sally felt burnt out. She frequently used negative phrases to describe how she felt about her role and her performance: *friggin' hard job*; *continual life of living failures; weary; frustrating; begging; deflated; basket case; jumping ship; abandonment;* and *making a dash before the bomb goes off*. She had been making plans to teach mostly in the mainstream section of the College the following year and since the interview, had been appointed the Year Nine Coordinator. She was not sure if she would remain in careers education, *you do just wonder, 'what the hell am I meant to be doing?'* Sally admitted to shedding *a lot of tears* in her decision-making process.

She attributed this burnout to a number of factors. Foundationally, she felt she was unqualified and unprepared to take on the role, particularly at the time of significant upheaval within Alternate Programs. Sally recognised her personality traits exacerbated the problems she had to deal with, such as chasing people around via email to seek approval. She felt personally responsible when Work Experience placements did not go well because students struggled with the environment or commitments. *I have to wear that personally because the kids can't, so I have to wear that. And that makes you very cynical as well, but also just deflated all the time.* She also noted that while *some people thrive [on a] reactive* environment, she did not. *It's not that you're walking on eggshells, you're just hyper-vigilant going 'righto, what's going to happen?'* She also expressed an added sense of pressure that her role happened at the end of a student's time with the school. *It's hard when you've got the support of everyone behind you because they're doing their bit. They're doing the welfare, social, wellbeing side. They're doing the educational outcomes, pitching the curriculum at their level, differentiation… Then I come in at the last to go, 'let's carry you out to the next part… out into the world where, unfortunately, we're not going to be there to hold your hand, but we're going to help you as* ***much*** *as we can to make it on your own without you having to turn back to see if we're still there waving you on.' And it's hard to get them to that point because of everything that they've experienced.* She worried that if she did not do her role properly, then she was undermining all the other support efforts that had gone into each student.

Sally recognised the success she had overseen and accomplished herself, but admitted it was difficult to keep in mind. She hoped there was someone more qualified and better suited to the role to take over from her. *I keep using the word 'jumping ship' and I do without any ounce of wanting pity at all, but I do believe there is someone else who can do my role far more effectively. Absolutely firmly believe that.* Sally expressed a sense of guilt about being unqualified and unprepared for the role. *I do trust my gut instinct and I do think everything I've done is pretty accurate… It's not like I've had to do a 180 [degree turn]… everything has led me generally where I think things need to go and the feedback I've gotten is agreeable with that. But, I've often, you know how you can't see the forest because of the trees?* She also said she sometimes felt frustrated with herself that she had not thought of all the possibilities for each particular student.

Sally explained that the decision to move on was not made easily. *I keep saying 'jumping ship' because… it's not that I failed, it's just that there's someone better. I know that… I feel like I'm abandoning [them]… but I'm going because I think it's the right decision… because I'm*

maybe not necessarily the best fit for this job or for here in the long run… You can't help but beat yourself up a little bit… I just feel like I'm making a dash for it before the bomb goes off… I'm very team orientated, loyal, emphatic, so I do- your heart string do get pulled for these guys. But I also go, where does it start and stop? … Where does your core business start, stop? Ultimately, Sally's decision to leave Alternate Programs came down to her own wellbeing and the difficulties she had managing the emotional workload.

9.4. Part Two: Discussion

Sally's narrative focused heavily on the context of Alternate Programs and the justifications for its existence. She included few details about her community and its rural social space aside from stressing the need for such a program in Westfield and the nature of the relationships she needed to cultivate with local employers for the Work Experience Program. Her narrative revealed a number of significant issues of social injustice that faced her students and affected her work. These stemmed from foundational issues such as the disadvantage her students experienced in many aspects of their lives and her own suitability to the role. Sally described some of the challenges – in and out of the education system – that impacted on her students' ability to succeed and become productive members of society. She identified a lack of resources to support them. The details she provided about her preparedness for the role, lack of access to professional learning, and burnout revealed shortcomings in social justice for teachers, as well as for their students.

9.4.1. Rural social space.

The data suggested that there was a 'placelessness' to Sally's narrative. In revisiting Relph's 1976 seminal work on place, Liu and Freestone (2016) described his sense of authentic place as one that "derives from insideness, from a sense of belonging to a place and its community" (p. 3). Relph discussed placelessness as a phenomenon resulting from modernization where – due to the globalisation of businesses, mass communication, and increased mobility – a place loses its sense of particularness. Sally's stories did not seem tied to the specific context of Westfield, rather her school and students could be located in any reasonably-sized regional centre or small city – a "placeless space[]… variously anonymous and

exchangeable" (Liu & Freestone, 2016, p. 3). The social and economic challenges that faced her students and the internal pressures of her school were not unique nor were they exclusive to regional or rural communities. In her narrative, Sally focused on the context of the particular educational program she taught in rather than the context of its location. Sally worked in Westfield and did not discuss her connections to the local community other than to say she felt the need support her students. She may have had a strong sense of her community, and may have been active in it, but she chose not to include these connections in her stories. On the few occasions she mentioned something off-campus, there still was no sense of a specific place – the relationships with employers were not connected to place nor were her wonderings of how much worse conditions for at-risk students must be in the broad and vague locations of *rural Australia* and the *outback*. The 'placelessness' of her narrative made it difficult to explore the depth of her understanding of her rural social space; however, she mentioned the specific challenges facing the population of Westfield in terms of statistical data such as the percentage of at-risk students.

9.4.1.1. Addressing the needs of her at-risk students.

Sally explained that the re-engagement program existed as the College's response to meeting the needs of their students. Westfield had a high percentage of at-risk youth and Alternate Programs catered to 18% of the students at Westfield College in 2016. The goal of Alternate Programs was to prepare students to be successful members of the community, and while Sally noted there was a high level of transience amongst the cohort, these students' career pathways were more similar to the Stayers rather than the Leavers. Sally presented her students as being viewed from outside the program as the "the unsuccessful 'stuck' other" (Corbett, 2010, p. 227) rather than being able to be successful and to leave for better opportunities. Corbett's (2010) "unsuccessful 'stuck' other" (p. 227) stereotype was a student who had not been able to achieve the necessary standardised academic success that served as a ticket to a better life elsewhere through further study or a 'desirable' career nor are they properly equipped for local industries. His conceptualisation of the "unsuccessful 'stuck' other" (2010, p. 227) is in contrast to the *successful* Stayers who tend to do so because of their desire to participate in the local or family business (Corbett, 2007). These Stayers have accumulated, and are able to apply, generations of knowledge of the community and its industries in a productive manner, if not in alignment with metrocentric measures of success. Furthermore, if Sally's students physically left Westfield, it was unlikely to be for tertiary education or a 'desirable' career path; they would

likely retain the negative 'stuck' stereotype, just in a different community. As discussed below, Sally's students struggled to meet standard expectations and many lacked the capitals conducive to positive mobility. Sally's description of her cohort highlighted that many of her students are from backgrounds of intergenerational poverty, which suggested that they may not have had access to resources or experiences to prepare them for local trades. Her recognition of this, and desire to help her students successfully gain employment, had a significant impact on how she approached her role.

This perception of her students influenced Sally's role in several ways. She collated data and communicated to external organisations such as the DET and to local community organisations to clarify the purpose of the programs. Her attempts to work with local businesses helped facilitate positive pathways for students. She also supported the students to become successful and to stay. To do so, she recognised the need to celebrate different measures of success for these students other than the traditional mainstream performance measures. Sally's, and by extension the principal's and Alternate Programs', adjustment of performance measures was an example of a school regaining a level of control over their goals. Westfield College tailored their goals to be more appropriate to their rural social space, rather than the standardised expectations created by metrocentric neoliberal policies. Cuervo (2016) pointed out that rural teachers worry about this disempowerment, which can be exacerbated when schools were competing for their reputations since it created additional stress. With rural and regional schools needing to adjust to the realities of increased competition, Westfield College needed to promote a positive reputation in the community, and Sally's work bolstered this. She collected additional data that contextualised and demonstrated improvements in the 'unflattering' elements of the school's data, she served as an advocate for her students when she built partnerships with local employers, and she supported her students by tailoring pathways explorations through activities such as a modified Work Experience.

9.4.1.2. Developing a contextualised Work Experience program.

The Work Experience program Sally had developed exemplified how her role aimed to encourage and facilitate positive outcomes for her students. By necessity, this involved educating community members and local employers to her students' needs and potential. Corbett et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of community members "and educators need[ing] to work together, but also that they would benefit from a better understanding of the

complexity of the problem they are working so hard to solve" (p. 18). In order to preserve the relationships and ensure students got the most out of these opportunities, Sally committed sizable resources to the program, including one-on-one staff supervision. She highlighted the importance of open lines of communication and explicitly explained the specific requirements of her program to employers – how it was different to mainstream Work Experience and the support her students required. The extensive time commitment and the resulting time constraints felt by teachers have been found to be direct contributors to burnout (Kokkinos, 2007), which was a growing concern for Sally. She also expressed anguish over the quandary of placing students. Sally framed it as a high-risk/high-reward situation of trying to provide every possible opportunity for students who needed it while preserving employer relationships. These decisions were made more difficult by the sense of personal guilt she felt when students caused things to go wrong. Her worries about a bad experience closing off a potential workplace for her students were linked to her concerns for the reputation of students in Alternate Programs. Not only was it problematic to lose a workplace – one of a limited number in the regional town – in an industry that her students were interested in, a bad experience entering the community's gossip space was at odds with her efforts to frame these students in a positive light. It also risked damaging the collaborative relationships between community and school, which Corbett et al. (2017) identified as vital for the potential prosperity of the student, school, business, and community. Communication and trust were necessary for students to learn about the possible career and for employers to learn about possible employees.

In part, Sally placed such importance on the Work Experience program because she thought it was one of the few glimpses into the world of work some students have. Many of her students came from backgrounds of generational and situational poverty, and a significant majority had at least one parent who was unemployed. Appadurai (2004) discussed the challenges facing low SES youth in their capacity to aspire and argued that the ability to do so "like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation" (p. 69). He stated that these students have less access to high-aspiration careers. So, Sally's focus on providing her students with access to careers and various pathways was one way she encouraged their ability to aspire. Alston and Kent (2006) found that rural youth who remain local, especially those who did not complete their education, were likely to experience high levels of underemployment and unemployment. This, coupled with Cuervo's (2016) identification of one of the effects of "'brain drain' and residualization of public schools… [having] the potential of exacerbating the concentration of 'pockets of disadvantage'

of students from low socioeconomic status" (p. 129), can present challenges for the sustainability of the rural community. Sally's narrative included strategies that she and the school used to try and disrupt this cycle to improve the outlook – and social justice – for their students.

9.4.2. Social justice.

Many of the stories in Sally's narrative revealed her concerns that while Alternate Programs – a set of programs designed to meet the needs of the most at-risk students – had the potential to improve the enactment of social justice for her students and the staff, there were serious shortcomings. Her primary concerns centred on issues such as appropriate use of resources, improving the recognition of Alternate Programs, and the value she found in acting as an advocate for her students.

Sally's description of her work included many examples of her efforts to help improve the social justice of her students. The examples of her work discussed in the previous two sections (9.4.1.1. & 9.4.1.2.) – particularly the drive to expose students to work environments through the Work Experience program and celebrations of contextualised measures of success – suggest improving social justice for her students was a significant motivation for Sally. The example of her re-structured Work Experience program was an example of her attempt to lessen the injustice concerning the inequality of opportunity for positive exposure to working life that faced many of her students. Sally's desire to do all she could to alleviate the injustices facing her at-risk students may have contributed to the guilt she felt in needing to leave the role for her own wellbeing. However, her belief that a more qualified person would replace her may not be realised due to a persistent lack of specialist teachers and resources in rural schools (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995; Cuervo, 2016), potentially exacerbating the already uneven playing field for her students.

9.4.2.1. Distributive justice: Not a sole solution.

Sally gave no indication that she felt Alternate Programs was an under-resourced program within the College, but rather she found problems with how the resources were distributed within the program and the continual need to fight for enough resources from sources external to the school. This aligned with Keddie's (2017) assertion that systemic issues of social

justice can remain despite claims that school autonomy is meant to alleviate them. She argued that increased school autonomy has the potential to improve economic justice for low socioeconomic students through local decision-making on the distribution of funds "through the explicit direction of material resources to support students of low socio-economic status… include[ing] initiatives designed to improve school retention, participation and achievement" (p. 384). While Keddie's work was not focused exclusively on rural schools, it further highlighted the problems Cuervo (2016) identified where a redistribution of funds to rural schools did not alleviate the systemic problems that created the injustices but rather they required greater recognitional and associational justice. Sally described and praised Westfield College's decisions to allocate significant resources to revamping and making Alternate Programs more efficient and sustainable. However, the nature of the challenges that faced her students required differing levels of resourcing to overcome the systemic obstacles – for example, finding and exiting students who did not attend required substantial resources. This exemplified the paradoxical problem that "school autonomy reform is … profoundly compromising of economic justice" (Keddie, 2017, p. 385) because it placed responsibility on the local entities to address systemic problems that were much bigger than their local context. This again echoed Cuervo's (2016) call for a more pluralistic sense of social justice to address the larger systemic issues facing rural schools (see Chapter Two).

Further developing the example of finding and exiting students, the State benefited financially from the local school diverting its limited resources to this task – exited students and their families would have their Centrelink benefits reduced and the DET would not need to allocate as much funding to Westfield College as their student numbers will have shrunk, particularly since students from disadvantaged backgrounds attracted more funding. Additionally, Keddie (2017) argued that this shift in responsibility had increased "the market imperatives of competition, economic efficiency and external auditing accompanying this shift have… forced schools to run themselves like businesses" (p. 385). Sally's work had been affected by this shift through the extensive gathering and presenting of data that her role entailed. Following the previous example, exiting those absent students helped to make the College's data 'better' and thereby made the school more competitive through their marketing, which Morgan and Blackmore (2013) identified as a growing concern for rural/ regional schools. Cuervo (2016) also argued that "rural schools were not free of the current educational market competition" (p. 128) and that staff felt that being under-resourced put them at a disadvantage when competing against local private schools. The data Sally collected was used in part to

explain the school's priorities and support mechanisms to families who may consider enrolling their students in one of the two local private schools or a regional boarding school. Her data seemed to be used as a way to reassure families with the capital to attend private schools that the College was addressing the 'problem' of Alternate Programs students and that they would not affect their child's education experience.

9.4.2.2. Recognitional justice: Power of valuing marginalised students.

Sally's focus on justifying and publicising Alternate Programs illustrated the importance of groups being able to define their own successes that are contextually based. This was an expression of Cuervo's (2016) fundamental understanding of recognitional justice in rural contexts where it "emphasises the need for recognition of different cultures and values, which form the core of their dignity, self-esteem, and self-respect" (p. 91). Sally described a number of ways that Alternate Programs created goals that are suitable for their situation – for example, a student finishing their VCAL certificate over an extended period, opening a bank account, or not using drugs for a week. She highlighted these as achievements rather than milestones that many in mainstream take for granted. This was reflective of Thomson's (2000) assertion that when a school's 'thisness' was not considered "any policy which works on the basis that all schools can achieve common 'outcomes', is idealist and light years away from the everyday life of 'disadvantaged schools'" (p. 168). Sally's narrative showed how Westfield College had come to recognise relevant 'everyday' outcomes of their Alternate Programs students, but also that the traditional measurements (AIP, attendance, completion rates, etc.) were still needed in order to communicate with outsiders to ensure the program is adequately recognised. She described how her role involved utilising both the traditional measurements and supplemental data to clarify and promote the program to outsiders such as the DET and the wider community. At least in the case of the SEIL's boss, this combination of supplemental and traditional data seemed to have lessened the combative nature of the relationship and resulted in an advocate in a position of power. This was key to improving recognitional justice as "misrecognition… has the capacity to produce harm and generate forms of oppression with the subsequent effect of diminishing a mode of being" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 91-92). Sally identified the acquisition of this advocate as particularly influential because they were able to correct his misrecognition of Alternate Programs. She expected this would result in a decrease in pressure and attacks from the DET to

meet the same expectations as the mainstream section of the College; she hoped this would mean less time justifying their existence and right to be respected.

While Sally's narrative revealed the ongoing struggles for Alternate Programs to be properly recognised in the community and by outside education organisations, she identified the value and benefits from the benefits of the principal's recognition of their work. She had felt supported and had stayed in the role as long as she had because of the relationship she had with the principal. White et al. (2009) identified supportive principals that took an interest in their novice teachers' work and listened to their input as a key element to successful rural schools. While Sally was not a beginning teacher, she was a novice to re-engagement and pathways advising. Part of her connection to the role was dependent on the recognition from her principal and that she was not "viewed from a deficit perceptive in that… skills and knowledge were highly valued and utilised… across the school" (White et al., 2009, p. 7). Sally had been able to bring her own skill set to the redevelopment of Alternate Programs through writing new policies and data collection. She also felt her expertise was recognised and appreciated in decision-making processes. These improvements in Alternate Programs, and Sally's reported contentment with the principal, were signs of a culture of distributed leadership and relational trust. Southworth (2009) called for distributed leadership to take the form of "developing lots of learning-centred leaders" (p. 108) and Mark seemed to have done this through the trust he had shown in the Alternate Programs' assistant principal and staff to tailor and provide the types of assistance their students required. By giving agency to the Alternate Programs staff, he had recognised the unique culture of the program, its importance to their rural students, and trusted the staff involved on a day-to-day basis to be in the best position to understand and shape its future directions.

9.4.2.3. Associational justice: Advocating for the underrepresented.

The idea of associational justice – of "meaningful participation [that] disarticulates dominant discourses and opens the door to different voices in schools" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 101) – was evident in the data where Sally served as an advocate for Alternate Programs and her students. Throughout the interview she discussed the harm done by ignorance and external stakeholders' misrecognition about the programs, giving examples of how increased understanding of the programs led to better results all around. The framing of herself as an advocate, and the obstacles she faced in doing so, revealed "the struggle to give voice to those

groups underrepresented [which] should be encouraged as a learning process that is to *learn from* rather than *learn about*" (emphasis in the original Cuervo, 2016, p. 104). She detailed a positive example of *learning from* in the anecdote about the SEIL's boss. The specific, contextualised information delivered by the people involved in Alternate Programs resulted in a new advocate in an influential position. By speaking his language of the standardized school data, supplemented by the richer data Sally had been tasked with collecting, they had been able to avoid being shut down. While working within the bureaucratic structure of the 'audit culture' (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2010), Sally was able to act as an activist professional, and as Groundwater-Smith and Sachs would say, resisted succumbing to the strict and standardised measurements of accountability. She was able to do this because she had the trust of her community, i.e. Westfield College, and had seen the value in recognising culturally-appropriate measures of success that had been developed within the marginalised group. Sally's work highlighted "the struggle for participation and voice is a struggle for the possibility of a particular social group to participate as political and social actors in their own right, discussing their own specific interests and goals" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 105). As such, it was possible that Sally considered contributing to this research as another platform to further participate and give voice to Alternate Programs and its students.

9.5. Summary

Sally's professional context was considerably different from other participants. Despite the differences, she identified the professional support offered by the Network as valuable even if she did not find the content of the professional learning directly relevant for her students. While there was little influence of her rurality in her discussion, she remained focused on the contextual challenges that faced her students, Alternate Programs, and the importance of knowing the context of her cohort. She highlighted a number of significant issues in relation to her rural social space and the social justice challenges arising from a misrecognition of Alternate Programs and the needs of the students – alluding to the need for greater recognitional justice in order for further improvements to be achieved. The challenges that faced her students extended beyond the pathways-related challenges since they required more support in an unfamiliar world of work. A significant portion of her work was devoted to advocating for her students, from working to improve their reputation in their rural social space through developing positive

partnerships in the community, to working within the bureaucratic system to improve the recognitional justice of Alternate Programs. Sally's description of her work and her advocacy suggested she was well placed to have significant influence on the pathways outcomes for her students as well as the cohort's reputation in the wider community. However, the highly reactionary nature of this work and the emotional toll required, had worn Sally down and left her feeling burnt out after only 18 months, leaving her with guilt and ongoing concerns for her students, but hope for her successor.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

In this chapter, I begin by revisiting my research questions in order to frame my conclusions from this research. Several key themes developed from the participants' narratives and underpinning all of them was the need for better recognition of the nature of rural pathways advising. The findings suggest that rural pathways advisors need to have extensive local knowledge and professional relationships in their community. The role places the pathways advisor in a potentially powerful position in rural communities through the influence they have in advising students about their job prospects – whether they stay or leave the community – and their network of local relationships. Finally, a well-resourced, supportive, active local careers network is an enormous benefit to rural pathways advisors and so to their schools, students, and communities. Each of these conclusions deals specifically with the issues of rurality. The role of rural pathways advisors is inextricably linked to their place – their role is shaped by their place and in turn, they shape their place.

Following the exploration of these conclusions, I then describe some of the limitations of this study and suggest areas for potential future research. In closing, I discuss my final thoughts from this project.

10.1. Revisiting the research questions

Before discussing my conclusions, I will restate my research questions. The main question was:

How is the experience of being a pathways advisor shaped by their rurality?

This question was supported by the sub-questions of:

How is their work related to their rural social space?

How is their work influenced by issues of social justice?

The findings of this study suggest there is a strong connection between pathways advising and rural communities. Reid et al. (2010) stressed that rural social space was "not a generalised or universal concept – it is an event, a performance, a practice" (p. 269). This makes it subjective

to each person in their community at the time of the interview. The co-constructed narratives of these rural pathways advisors also suggested that the notions of rural social space and social justice are interconnected. Each specific rural social space had its own specific manifestations of issues of social justice, even if the issues were similar across communities. In turn, the specific manifestations of issues of social justice in a place affected the rural social space itself. When considering how to best address the sub-questions in this chapter, I decided it would be most efficient and effective to consider them together, rather than individually as I had in the participant chapters. Individual pathways advisors framed what were often common challenges slightly differently, so it was more appropriate to structure the participant chapters to reflect this. However, in this chapter, I have organised my conclusions around these common challenges with an exploration that includes both the aspects of rural social space and social justice.

The interconnectedness of rural social space with issues of social justice aligns with Thomson's (2000) explanation of her concept of *thisness.* She stated the need to consider the local context in order for social justice practice to lead to realistic improvements in that "'thisness' suggests what *needs* to be done, but provides clues as to the limits of what *can* be done, even in the most sympathetic and well-resourced policy circumstances" (emphasis in the original, p. 169). She further argued that:

> the capacity of each school to deal with the everyday demands of managing the relations of inequalities, their capacity to take on systemic reform policy and their adoption of the principles of doing justice are shaped and delimited by neighbourhood and systemic contexts. (p. 167)

As with Thomson's argument that improving justice requires it to be contextualised, conclusions from this study or recommendations to improve rural pathways advising must be tailored to suit each school and community.

10.2. Conclusions and recommendations from the research

The conclusions from this research are:

1. Greater recognition of the work of rural pathways advisors is needed as the foundation for improvements.
2. Rural pathways advisors need strong local knowledge.

3. Rural pathways advisors hold a powerful position in their community.
4. A strong and well-resourced professional network with active members is necessary to improve practice and recognition.

10.2.1. Greater recognition of the work of rural pathways advisors is needed as the foundation for improvements.

In this study, one of the most common concerns expressed by participants was that their work was poorly understood, particularly by principals and education organisations. Often this concern extended to non-rural people misunderstanding the reality of rural life. There was evidence that there were misunderstandings between advisors and between advisors and other staff members. This suggests that while there is flexibility to develop the role to best meet the needs of the school and community, the flexibility may also contribute to the poor recognition of the role. Improving the recognitional justice for rural pathways advisors is at the heart of improving their work, the outcomes for their students, and the sustainability of their communities. Part of addressing these issues is for rural pathways advisors to have greater associational justice. They need more opportunities to be heard and to have input into the decisions being made about their work. This should occur within their schools, communities, and at policy levels. For example, if principals and DET representatives attended Network meetings there could be increased dialogue between the groups, leading to a better mutual understanding.

However, the flexibility built into the role – a vital and important feature – may be problematic given the challenges in accessing adequate professional learning. At the time of the interviews, half of the participants did not have a qualification in careers advising and several reported difficulties in accessing professional learning, including attending Network meetings. This may be related to rural schools sometimes just needing to put bodies into roles – particularly a misunderstood role – rather than having a competitive application process as larger urban schools may be able to undertake. Furthermore, the nature of the role itself brings into question the need for such a qualification. Based on the findings of this study, a qualification in careers counselling is not necessary, but advisors may find it useful as professional development. Understanding the rural social space appears to be much more foundational to the role. Any

qualification courses or other professional learning programs should focus on the context the advisor will work in. I will expand on the importance of local knowledge in the next section.

The role of the school principal was highly influential on the role of the pathways advisor. The findings suggest that there was a relationship between the recognition a principal had about pathways advising and the resources made available to their advisor, linking improved distributive justice to improved recognitional justice. Put simply, better recognition led to a better distribution of resources. This aligns with Cuervo's (2016) justification for the need to have a pluralistic sense of social justice in rural education – there needs to be greater understanding before resources can be distributed appropriately. It is important to note that even when principals were portrayed in the study as causing more obstacles, it was not out of malice but rather by being unaware. This misunderstanding or lack of awareness suggests that there needs to be stronger communication within the schools between leadership and the pathways advisor – the onus of which does not lie solely on the principal to remedy. Pathways advisors themselves need to consider how transparent they are about their work to other staff within their school as this would bring a greater awareness of the pathways exploration program and the nature of their advising role. Rural school principals already have a significant workload, so pathways advisors should take it upon themselves, use the autonomy granted them, to improve communications with their principals in order to improve the support to perform their role well.

The role of principal is one that is well-placed in a position of power to improve the recognition of pathways advisors' work to others. As potentially important advocates for the pathways advisor in their school, principals should use their position to help clarify the role to other staff members, facilitate an understanding of the work with the wider community, and assist with challenges arising from larger organisations such as the DET. Principals are a vital part of improving recognition of the work of rural pathways advisors. They have power over the distribution of resources within their school and the position of principal holds more sway than the advisors themselves in promoting their work to other stakeholders.

On a larger scale, the study found that there were problems of misrecognition by education organisations – both of the role of rural pathways advisors and of the realities of living in a rural place. The lack of recognition by these groups is problematic because it causes injustices beyond the work of the pathways advisors. When organisations such as the DET do not understand the work of rural pathways advisors, it impacts on the advisors' ability to support their students and community. This again highlights the need for a pluralistic social justice

agenda – better recognitional and association justice are necessary for better distributive justice. The two organisations mentioned in this study – the DET and the CEAV – should engage more with rural pathways advisors. The Victorian Parliament's (2018) Inquiry has the potential to increase the understanding of the work of pathways advisors, but the extent of support for rural advisors or effects of any larger changes is yet to be seen. There needs to be more genuine consultation between stakeholders in order to improve social justice for rural pathways advisors and, by extension, their students and communities.

In contrast to the recognitional issues contributed to by some of the principals and education organisations, one stakeholder group that appeared to have a solid recognition of the work of the pathways advisors was their local communities. Ongoing communication seemed to be key. The participant's stories also suggested that this recognition enabled them to be more effective in their role. There seemed to be a fair understanding from parents and businesses about the role, but most advisors saw room for improvement. Recognition by the local community – parents and employers – is essential because they are also part of the shared rural social space. It takes a collective effort to support students to achieve positive outcomes and for them to develop an accurate sense of whether they should stay local or leave the community. This depends on strong lines of communication and the advisors having a multitude of positive relationships in the community. The importance and nuances of the relationships between the community and advisor are explored in more detail in the following two conclusions, but also warranted a brief mention in regard to recognition.

In summary, these examples of varying degrees of recognition of the work of pathways advisors demonstrate the need for increased communication between stakeholders. The most straightforward and efficient way to begin to improve relationships and understanding between these groups and the rural pathways advisors would be through more effective use of the Network. Participants identified it as a means by which to gain the attention of the more powerful groups of the principal network, the DET, and the CEAV. Speaking as a collective would have more influence on the decision-makers than doing so individually. Acting and speaking collectively also provides a single point of contact for communication. This would make meaningful collaboration easier and more likely than with a number of individuals. I will elaborate on the role of the Network in the final conclusion.

10.2.2. Rural pathways advisors need strong local knowledge.

Despite the variety of tasks each pathways advisor had, the study found that there were two bodies of knowledge they needed for their role: knowledge of the technical aspects, such as MIPs requirements or Work Experience forms and a knowledge of the community and its workforce/ economic outlook. In other words, they needed general, technical knowledge that all pathways advisors need, regardless of their location, as well as strong local knowledge. The technical knowledge could be gained relatively quickly through external professional learning during events hosted by organisations like the DET and CEAV or by reading the relevant notices and websites. However, acquiring the necessary local knowledge requires more time and personal experience. Rural pathways advisors need strong local knowledge in order to translate the technical knowledge appropriately for their context. This is similar to Reid et al.'s (2010) assertion that teachers need to understand their rural social space and use it to shape their pedagogy.

Participants mentioned several key aspects of local knowledge that they felt were most relevant to their work, but the most important of these was the network of relationships amongst a wide variety of community members. These relational networks are vital because they form part of the town's interactional infrastructure, which Kilpatrick and Loechel (2014) argue are an effective way to "build community social capital and ensures better matching of [local employment] needs with provision" (p. 17) of education opportunities for those skills. The relationships are mechanisms for gaining and maintaining pathways-related information about the town's ever-changing demography, geography, and economics. It is important for pathways advisors to have a strong sense of their community's past, present, and future. The knowledge gained from these relationships is necessary for rural pathways advisors in order for them to give appropriate advice to students and to find suitable work placements. It is also an indication of how influential the role of pathways advisor can be in a rural community, an idea that is further developed in the next Section.

The centrality of local knowledge to rural pathways advising has implications on the role itself, many of which stem from principals needing a better understanding. There is a need for advisors to be better supported in accessing relevant professional learning that is contextualised to suit the needs of their community (see Section 10.2.4.). Principals should ensure their pathways advisors have adequate time to perform the role. This includes a recognition of the time needed to develop their local knowledge, which cannot be gained through traditional,

generic professional learning opportunities. Another implication of the need for principals to understand the importance of local knowledge to pathways advisors, relates to appointing someone to the position. Given the need for a strong understanding of the rural social space and the potential stakes of not understanding (see Section 10.2.3.), evidence gathered in this study strongly suggests that it is more appropriate to appoint someone who is active in the community, and/or has deep local knowledge. Appointing a non-local to the role is akin to someone teaching out of their area of expertise – they can learn on the job, but it is not ideal. To summarise, principals need to have a better understanding of how their pathways advisors gain and maintain their local knowledge and how they use that knowledge in their work. As stated in the previous Section, it is essential to improve communication. Principals could further support the development of their pathways advisor's local knowledge by ensuring advisors have a sufficiently flexible schedule during school-hours so that they can interact with community members.

10.2.3. Rural pathways advisors hold a powerful position in their community.

By focusing on the rural social space that these pathways advisors work in, I began with an assumption that there was a relationship between the work of the advisors and a variety of elements of their rurality. Rural social space is a shared place, so while the particularities of each rural social space affects the work of the pathways advisors, the work of the pathways advisors affects the rural social space.

Perhaps the most significant influence the advisors have are through their perceptions and framing to students about local jobs or the need to move away – who leaves, who stays, and who returns. This requires them to have strong local knowledge (explored in the previous Section) when discussing the possibilities with students, their families, and when liaising with businesses. An incomplete understanding or a bias one way or the other may have long-lasting impacts on the town. Pathways advisors are in a position to mediate the outmigration of students by ensuring they are exposed to, and prepared for, work futures that are local, in other rural areas, or in urban contexts (see Section 2.1.4.).

The pathways advisors are likely to be one of the main professional links between the school and the employers in the community. These relationships, as part of the interactional

infrastructure, present opportunities to provide students with a clear and realistic understanding of the work-needs of the community, assisting them to make better-informed decisions about whether they stay or leave. This benefits all stakeholders – students, families, schools, and community – as the Stay or Leave dilemma plays an important role in the future of the community. However, one of the most striking aspects of the partnerships reported in the findings of this research was how each of the advisors who coordinated the Work Experience program stressed that they relied heavily on *favours* from the employers, with a constant fear that a single student could spoil it. This suggests the vital program has a precariousness in these communities, particularly when some employers had already declined to participate. Not only does this exacerbate the social injustice of inequalities of opportunities facing many rural students, it would seem to be in the businesses' best interest to help prepare their future workforce. The reluctance of businesses to engage with local students does not present an attractive prospect for students interested in those industries to stay local. This is disappointing for the students and contributes to the complexity of pathways advisors' work. One recommendation to encourage more businesses to participate would be to hold events in the community that highlight the benefits to local businesses to participate and why the program is important for students and the community. These events would also serve to clarify what the program exactly entails – what employers are expected to do and can expect from the students during placement. Raising awareness of the Work Experience program should not be left to the pathways advisor alone. Ideally, it would be a collaborative effort between a variety of stakeholders such as LLENs, local government, and other community organisations.

Another powerful aspect of pathways advising arises from the relationships they develop with their students and families. Pathways advisors are providing advice about whether or not a child should leave their home to enrol in additional qualifications which is an undertaking requiring a significant financial and emotional investment. Alternatively, they are providing advice that taking up work locally will both suit the student's interests and be a reliable future. For their advice to carry weight, there needs to be a positive and strong relationship. As participants in this study suggested, developing these relationships and the trust necessary can be helped by being an active citizen in the community. The pathways advisor's presence in the community can demonstrate their commitment to the town and encourages the relationship to become multi-faceted. It might be easier to trust someone who is known to families outside of the school context.

While the participants mostly described either having positive relationships and/or aspiring to improve relationships with students, families, and local employers, it begs the question of what the consequences might be if this is not the case. What if the pathways advisor does not recognise the need for such relationships or is unable to sustain them? Or, what if the favours necessary for Work Experience dry up? It appears that much of the pathways advising role is dependent on relationships and favours, most of which are built in the shared social space of the community where "everyone knows you and how and where you are situated" (Reid et al., 2010, p. 271). By trading on their standing in the community, pathways advisors are risking their professional and personal reputations. These are high stakes, especially in small communities. Some of this may be prevented or alleviated if the principal understands the pathways role. This would lead to the appointment of a suitable person to role to begin with, but if principals are aware of the work of their advisors, they can also intercede and serve as an ally if things go wrong or their advisor needs more support.

All of this underscores the importance of having suitable people in the pathways advising role. It is in the best interest of the educator, the students, their families, the school, and the community to have someone who is able to build and maintain a variety of relationships. In participants' narratives, the adage of "it takes a village to raise a child" came through in that a whole-of-community approach was necessary for students to gain the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about their pathways futures. Central to this is the advisor – the cog in the community – facilitating the relationships and managing the flow of information between stakeholders. Given the power that pathways advisors potentially have in their community, a suitable pathways advisors should be both community-minded and have a sense of the social injustices influencing their students' pathways options. The complexity of the role makes it more difficult to find a suitable candidate, but also more important that the 'right' person is appointed to the position.

10.2.4. A strong and well-resourced professional network with active members is necessary to improve practice and recognition.

Findings from the study reinforce the existing literature regarding the value of professional networks for rural teachers (see for example Lyons et al., 2006). Participants viewed their local Network as a way to reduce professional isolation and as a way to build their

professional capacity – gaining both technical and local knowledge. Additionally, the Network seems to have the potential to serve as a mechanism for reducing social injustice facing rural pathways advisors. These functions, coupled with their organisation of the Careers Expo, make the Network an invaluable resource, not just to the pathways advisors themselves, but by extension to their students and community. Unfortunately, there were concerns about the Network's future. This would have a negative impact on its ability to provide quality professional support to new, and existing, members. It is additionally troubling considering the Network was the main source of professional learning for the participants, with other opportunities more difficult to attend or perceived as irrelevant to their rural context.

The most practical function of the Network is as a source of contextualised professional learning. The professional learning includes the general, technical information necessary for pathways advising, but more importantly it is a trove of local knowledge. The variety of stakeholders involved – public and private school advisors, members of the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), and representatives of local branches of community groups and tertiary institutions – means that there is a wealth of local knowledge and resources available to members. Participating in the Network should help pathways advisors develop an understanding of the region's rural social space and assist them in developing local relationships beyond their home community. The Network's collective local knowledge also includes understanding of the change over time of the region, with some members having served for many years. The importance of local knowledge and relationships in the community was explored in the previous two Sections – the Network extends the sense of 'local' to the wider region. Having an understanding of the local region is important to the work of pathways advisors because their communities are not isolated and there is a likelihood that local work or Work Experience may mean commuting to a neighbouring town – for example, the mechanics in Southwick may not take on female students, but Greenfield's will. Pathways advisors with strong local regional knowledge will be able to give more appropriate advice to their students.

Another key aspect of the Network is its potential to improve social justice for its members and their communities. The Network does this through easing distributive injustices, particularly the inequality of opportunity, by providing relatively accessible, relevant professional learning for pathways advisors. It reduces issues of recognitional justice by communicating with the principals' network, and it aims to improve associational injustices by serving as a collective voice to speak back to power and policymakers. An under-resourced or poorly supported Network – a result of poor distributive justice – would add to these injustices

by cutting off access to relevant professional learning and diminishing the voices of those involved.

The Network, along with all the other branches around the state, need to be better supported by the DET, CEAV, and school principals. Each network should serve as a point of contact for the DET and CEAV to facilitate better communication and consultation between the groups. This should focus on the education organisations providing up-dates on policy-changes and professional learning opportunities, but also should include representatives listening and responding to the needs of rural advisors. As the point of contact, networks can also act on behalf of its members to the educational organisations. Rather than having single advisors approach the larger organisations, a collective request or suggestion would carry more weight and be more likely to get a result. As an example of an attempt to bring more awareness to associational injustice, the Network sent a submission to *The Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian School*s held by the Victorian Parliament (2018) on behalf of its members. A number of the main ideas from the submission were reflected in the final report and there was at least a mention in the recommendations that more needed to be done to support rural youth and schools. On a smaller scale, individual school principals could better support the networks through providing time for their advisors to attend meetings and learning about their initiatives such as the Careers Expo. The Network's ability to work to improve social justice for its members remains an area in need of significant improvement. While the Network is a vital actor, it alone cannot fix the system.

Going forward, there are several vital considerations to ensure the effectiveness and continuation of the Network. Firstly, the Network itself needs to reflect on how it ensures it meets the needs of all members. This is a matter of paying more attention to the recognitional and associational justice of its members. For example, the physical meetings could be supplemented with video conferencing and a wider variety of topics for discussion should be considered. It will also be important to consider the non-school members of the Network and encourage them to have more active participation in meetings. This engagement would lead to the type of collaboration that has been so highly valued by most participants.

Secondly, there needs to be better support for networks from principals and educational organisations. This is linked to these groups better recognising the work of their pathways advisors (see Section 10.2.1.). As Cuervo (2016) argued, teachers alone cannot solve the social injustices facing them and their students. Principals should provide their advisors with the time

necessary to attend the meetings and should be more active collaborators in initiatives like the Careers Expo. This requires greater communication between the groups. There is also a need for improved support from organisations such as the DET and the CEAV. This starts with the organisations recognising that the Network is a key source for professional learning for members. It should also include the reinstatement of DET representatives at meetings. These representatives should provide support and guidance and would be a key aspect to improving communication and understanding between the two groups.

10.2.5. Summary of conclusions.

In summary, these conclusions underpin the need for the work of rural pathways advisors to be better understood. Fundamental misunderstandings by key stakeholders have increased the challenges that already face rural educators. Rural pathways advising is a complex and flexible role within schools and their wider communities. The role requires them to have a strong understanding of their local and regional rural social space. This knowledge, and the vital relationships from which it develops, places the advisors in a powerful position in their communities. They give advice that influences the local population and workforce. This requires a great deal of trust. It is a role that requires their professional knowledge to be kept up-to-date on topics that are constantly evolving. They need to be better supported to maintain this knowledge, through their various networks, with better resourcing. Beyond the relationships they develop in their communities, their main source of professional learning occurs through the local Network. The Network alleviates professional isolation and is well-positioned to act in ways to improve the distributive, recognitional, and associational justice for rural pathways advisors. However, none of this will improve without a greater understanding of the role and work done by rural pathways advisors.

10.3. Limitations

There were several limitations to this research that have impacted the conclusions I have been able to draw. Firstly, my conclusions about how rurality affects the experience of being a rural pathways advisor are based on responses from a subset of advisors. Participants were all public-school advisors who worked in the same region. Pathways advisors in private schools or

in other organisations may have different experiences. Also, since participants were members of the same Network, conclusions about how it does, and should, function may not be the same in other regions. Other limitations arose from my data collection and analysis methods. The interviews in this project were the first I had conducted in a research setting. As I developed my interview skills through the process of piloting the questions and conducting the interviews used in the thesis, my ability to facilitate the conversation improved, resulting in richer and more detailed stories. Also, as I worked through my analysis, it became clear that I should have asked participants explicitly about their sense of social justice. Cuervo (2016) stressed that the term is understood differently by different people in different contexts. So, my understanding and exploration of social justice in the context of the participants may not fully align with their own understanding of it. Finally, while I attempted to set aside my own biases, my experiences as a rural pathways advisor likely had an influence on my conclusions. My understanding of the role was initially shaped by my rural social space and was limited to only a few years. Additionally, as I mentioned in the Prologue, my sense of being an outsider to the community was also a significant part of my experience of being a rural pathways advisor. My experiences may have drawn my attention more closely to certain aspects of participants' stories. These limitations could inform crucial research in the future. I will explore some of the possibilities in the following Section.

10.4. Future Research

Several possibilities for future research emerged from this study. They include revisiting participants to track the changes over time, investigating how the advisors address the needs of specific groups in the community, and looking further into the workings of local careers networks with the inclusion their non-public school members. These topics could be explored through a longitudinal ethnographic study. This would be of particular value given the temporal nature of rural social space and the rapidly changing information in pathways and work futures. The data also seem to suggest that advisors gain confidence and a more nuanced understanding of the role over time, so exploring how their programs, outlooks, priorities, and approaches evolve would provide valuable insight into rural pathways advising.

There is also a need to broaden the study and focus more specifically on certain aspects of the pathways advising role. This might include how they cater to the specific needs and

expectations of different cohorts of their students – for example, groups that might need additional support or groups with high social and navigational capital. A broader study could also explore the impacts of the work of rural pathways advisors from the perspective of different stakeholders such as their students, their families, school leadership, and local employers. This broader scope to the research would add to the growing body of knowledge about the complexity of rural social spaces and how networks of people work together to support their youth and community sustainability. Having a better understanding of these complexities would have policy implications as well as it could lead to policies that more appropriately address the contextual challenges and support positive outcomes.

Finally, given the centrality of the Network to these participants and its potential to help improve practice as well as distributive, recognitional, and associational justice for rural pathways advisors, it warrants further investigation. This could be done through a participatory action research project which would help empower members to explore and enact changes they consider necessary. My research only included a subset of members, so a project that included all members could illuminate their perspectives and how they interact with the Network. Also, broadening the scope further to study other networks in rural areas could be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the role of such groups and provide more evidence for requests for better resourcing.

Exploring these areas would add to our understanding of rural pathways advising and its impact on rural youth and communities. This improved understanding could influence policy decisions in relation to supporting the health of rural communities and lead to better conditions for the advisors, improved outcomes for rural students, and strengthened rural communities.

10.5. Concluding Statement

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that rurality has a profound influence on the work of rural pathways advisors. Much of their work is grounded in the reality of their community and through their understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented locally – and wider afield – they are positioned to have a significant influence on their rural social space. Therefore, I argue that the work of pathways advisors is important not just for their students, but for the sustainability of their communities as well. My research has also revealed how misunderstood rural pathways advisors are by those in positions of power, such as the DET and

principals, and the negative consequences this can have on their work, students, and community. This needs to change in order for there to be a reduction in the social injustices facing rural pathways advisors, and by extension their students and communities.

The participants in this study were genuinely passionate about helping their students and for the most part enjoyed their pathways advising roles. I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank them for their participation and candidness. They were people who were doing the best they could within their context and with the resources they had. These advisors were working within a system that largely did not understand them. This speaks to the continuation of *rural* being considered on the periphery of policy and social consciousness, reinforcing the need to bring it further into focus in meaningful and constructive ways. It is not just to leave rural students, educators, and their communities to fight for themselves. They deserve better and have more to offer than is currently recognised. Improving the support and understanding of rural pathways advisors would be an effective entry point for such change as they are vital cogs in their communities, with influence in and out of the local school.

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Appendices

A. Glossary

B. Key Careers-related terms

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A. Glossary

Definitions of key terms and acronyms.[25]

ATAR – Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, a rank given to students completing VCE or the equivalent, showing a student's achievement in relation to other students. The ATAR is the primary criterion for entering most undergraduate university programs in Australia.

CAP – Career Action Plan, a planning document designed to be used by young people and intended to reflect their increased career development learning.

CEAV – Career Education Association of Victoria, a not-for-profit association that supports and trains career practitioners.

CICA – Career Industry Council of Australia, the national peak body for the career industry, which is comprised of 10 professional career development associations across Australia.

DET – Department of Education and Training, the Victorian Government department responsible for learning and development support, services and resources for all Victorians.

ES – Education Support, an employment classification for staff providing support services to schools such as human resources, finance, grounds maintenance, library, canteen and classroom assistance.

[25] All definitions are direct quotes from *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, Parliament of Victoria Economic Education Jobs and Skills Committee (2018) pages xvii-xix. Only terms directly referenced in this thesis are included here.

LLEN – Local Learning and Employment Network, a statewide network of 31 incorporated associations that create partnerships between employers, schools, training organisations and community agencies within their geographical region.

MIPs – Managed Individual Pathways, funding provided by the Victorian Government to government schools to provide career development services to students in Years 10–12.

SBA – School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, a pathway within VETiS that enables a student to undertake an apprenticeship while enrolled in either VCE or VCAL.

TAFE – Technical and further education, institutions providing vocational courses, under the National Training System, the Australian Qualifications Framework and the Australian Quality Training Framework.

TIS – Tertiary Information Service, a not-for-profit collective of higher education providers that organises career events.

VCAL – Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, a hands-on option for Victorian Year 11 and 12 students, offering practical work-related experience and literacy and numeracy skills.

VCE – Victorian Certificate of Education, a certificate available to Victorians on satisfactory completion of their secondary education.

VET – Vocational Education and Training

VET Cluster – A group of schools participating in VET that share facilities and staff expertise.

VETiS – Vocational Education and Training in Schools, where students undertake a VET course within a school.

VTAC – Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, the central office that administers the application process for places in tertiary course at higher education providers in Victoria.

B. Key Career-related Terminology

Career- "a job or profession that someone does for a long time" –Merriam Webster Dictionary

Career counselling- North American term for providing services related to career development, in Australia it is "most often conducted in a one-to-one or small group setting. It is concerned with assisting individuals to identify, own and manage their career concerns." (Patton, 2001, p. 14)

Career development practitioner- latest term for a *career practitioner*, an accredited career-practice professional, may work in a variety of organisations including the private and public sector and whose main role is to provide career-related counselling/guidance/information/development, an umbrella term (Douglas, 2010)

Career development/ career intervention- "a description of both the factors and the processes influencing career behaviour, and is synonymous with career intervention (i.e. the practice of career development)… it is the process of managing learning and work over the lifespan" (Patton, 2001, p. 14)

Career education- learning *about* careers including "critical discussion and examination of how social, economic and political concerns contribute to the formation of a 'career' identity" (Irving, 2010, p. 20); concerns the development of self-awareness skills, choices within work, decision-making and planning skills (Patton, 2001)

Career educator/teacher- teacher in a secondary school who delivers and/or organises the delivery of that individual school's career education curriculum, may or may not be an accredited career practitioner

Career guidance- European term for providing services related to career development, in Australia it covers "activities, which are designed to assist individuals to make and implement informed choices about their career development" (Patton, 2001, p. 14)

Career information- covers a wide variety of concepts including: occupation descriptions, employment trends and opportunities, and details about attending courses such as costs and availability (Patton, 2001)

Job- "the work that a person does regularly in order to earn money"- Merriam Webster Dictionary

Vocational education- learning *for* a career, skills and knowledge required for a specific occupation or industry

C. Monash University Ethics Approval

MONASH University

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

Approval Certificate

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and has granted approval.

Project Number: 8274
Project Title: Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice
Chief Investigator: Professor Simone White
Expiry Date: 30/03/2022

Terms of approval - failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*.

1. The Chief Investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst your hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. Amendments to approved projects including changes to personnel must not commence without written approval from MHUREC.
7. Annual Report - continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report.
8. Final Report - should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected completion date.
9. Monitoring - project may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
10. Retention and storage of data - The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

Thank you for your assistance.

Professor Nip Thomson

Chair, MUHREC

CC: Ms Melyssa Fuqua, Dr Judith Williams

List of approved documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Consent Form	FUQUA Consent Form RCEO	14/03/2017	1
Consent Form	FUQUA Consent Form CE	14/03/2017	1
Supporting Documentation	FUQUA Interview Questions	14/03/2017	1
Supporting Documentation	FUQUA Expo Interview Questions	14/03/2017	1
Explanatory Statement	FUQUA Explanatory Statement	29/03/2017	2

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D. Monash University Ethics Amendment

MONASH University

Melyssa Fuqua <melyssa.fuqua@monash.edu>

Amendment Approval - 8274

1 message

donotreply@infonetica.net <donotreply@infonetica.net> 13 June 2017 at 13:24
To: Jennifer.Rennie@monash.edu
Cc: Melyssa.Fuqua@monash.edu, Judy.Williams@monash.edu

Dear Dr Jennifer Rennie

Project Title: Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice

The amendment has been assessed and approved by the Human Ethics Low Risk Review Committee

Please log into the ethics and compliance portal using the link below to access the details of this project.

https://ethicsapps.monash.edu

E. Victorian Department of Education and Training Ethics Approval

Department of
Education & Training

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne Victoria 3002
Telephone: 03 9637 2000
DX210083

2017_003340

Miss Melyssa Fuqua
[redacted]

Dear Miss Fuqua

Thank you for your application of 15 March 2017 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools titled *Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice*.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. Department approved research projects currently undergoing a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) review are required to provide the Department with evidence of the HREC approval once complete.

2. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Training.

3. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals. This is to be supported by the Department of Education and Training approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

4. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Training for its consideration before you proceed.

5. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.

6. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education Training in any publications arising from the research.

[illegible]

VICTORIA
State Government

F. Explanatory Statement

Project: Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice

Chief Investigator:

Dr Jennifer Rennie
Faculty of Education
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Co-Investigators:

Melyssa Fuqua
Faculty of Education
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Dr Judy Williams
Faculty of Education
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You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researcher via the phone number or email address listed above.

What does the research involve?

The aim of this study is gain a better understanding of the professional identities and practice of rural careers educators in public schools around Victoria. Careers education is an important area of learning for students in the rapidly changing 21st century. This research will explore how careers educators see themselves as professionals and how they develop and conduct careers education in their school. The other main focus of this research is how working in a rural school influences the way careers educators see themselves and their practice. Rural schools are often seen as similar to each other and in deficit to their urban counterparts. However, in this research, I want to honour the uniqueness of each school and community through the voices and perspectives of rural educators.

If you agree to be involved in this research, you will be asked to participate in one face to face interview that is expected to last for 60 minutes. The interview will focus on your careers educator role within your school. There will be an optional, shorter follow-up interview conducted via phone call lasting no longer than 30 minutes depending on the results of the initial interviews. The interviews will be recorded digitally and written transcripts will be provided to you. You may correct any errors in the record.

Why were you chosen for this research?

You were chosen for this research because you are a careers educator in a government rural school in Victoria. The aim of the research is to include a variety of perspectives on the identity and work of rural careers educators, and your voice and experiences will make a valuable contribution to the study.

Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research

In order to consent to participate in this research, you should read, sign, and return the attached consent form to me via email (melyssa.fuqua@monash.edu). You will also need to seek permission from your principal and have him/her sign the appropriate consent form. You have the right to withdraw from the research at any point without any consequences. If you withdraw before the identifying information has been separated from the interview records, the information you have provided will be separated

and removed from the research. If you withdraw after the information has been de-identified (i.e. after the final interview) it will not be possible to extract your contribution to the research.

Possible benefits and risks to participants

Participants should not experience any discomfort or be placed at any risk by participating in this research. Participants will not receive any payment for their participation. However, participants may benefit from reflecting on their professional identities. This may help them to reconnect with their motivations for teaching, which can renew their sense of purpose and passion. It is also an opportunity to grow as educators and become more aware of their ability to create programs that are relevant and empowering. This may be particularly helpful for rural careers educators given the nature of their responsibilities and the relative inequality of opportunity facing their students.

Confidentiality

Once the interviews are completed, all identifying information will be removed from the records and pseudonyms or codes will be used for individuals and schools.

Storage of data

Files will be kept in a locked cabinet, on a password protected computer, and on a password protected cloud storage account through Monash University. Only myself and my two supervisors will have access to this data. The data will be destroyed when it is no longer required or after 5 years.

Use of data for other purposes

The findings of this research will be used in my PhD thesis. They may also be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. No identifying information will be published.

Results

The results of the study will be available via a summary of the findings of the thesis. They will also be included in future publications. If you would like access to these findings at the conclusion of the study, please contact Melyssa Fuqua.

Complaints

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics (MUHREC):

Executive Officer
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Room 111, Chancellery Building E,
24 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus
Research Office
Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052 Email: muhrec@monash.edu Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

Thank you,
Melyssa Fuqua

G. Consent Form

Project: 'Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice'

Chief Investigator: Dr Jennifer Rennie
Co-investigators: Judy Williams and Melyssa Fuqua

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	Yes	No
One in-depth interview (approximately 60 minutes)	☐	☐
One optional follow up interview (less than 30 minutes via phone)	☐	☐
Audio recording of interviews	☐	☐

Name of Participant: _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

H. Permission Letter Form

Project: Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice

Date

Professor Simone White

Faculty of Education

Monash University- Clayton Campus

Dear Professor Simone White,

Thank you for your request to recruit participants from (school's name) **for the above-named research.**

I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement regarding the research project Rural Careers Educators' Professional Identity and Practice **and hereby give permission for this research to be conducted.**

Yours sincerely.

(Signature of person granting permission)

(Name of person granting permission)

(Position of person granting permission)

I. Interview Questions

Background questions

1. How many years of professional experience have you had in:
    - Education?
    - Rural education?
    - Careers education?
2. How did you come to work in this school?
3. Tell me about this community/school/students? What do you see as some of the local strengths and areas of concern?
4. Have you undertaken any formal qualifications/ professional development in the careers education field? Which, when, why?
    - How active are you in your local careers network?
    - Overall, how has your careers education specific PD impacted on your teaching/ guidance?

Motivations for being a careers educator

1. How/ why did you become involved in careers education?
2. What attributes do you have that you find most useful/beneficial in your careers role?
3. What do you think has most influenced how you approach careers education?
4. Do you enjoy your careers related work, why/not?
5. How confident are you that your students' needs are being met?

Characteristics of careers education program

1. Please outline the main responsibilities of your careers education role.
2. Describe the structure/provision/program for careers education in your school. (for example- teachers involved, subjects offered, time allocated, year levels involved)
3. How was the current careers education program developed? (for example- resources used, people involved, review process)
4. What do you see as the:
    - Most important aspects of careers education?
    - Most problematic aspects of careers education?
5. What would you change about careers education at your school? Why?

Impacts of rural context

1. How does working in a rural area impact on your careers education related work? (for example- local content needs, distance from/ access to resources, student aspirations)
2. Do you see a tension between local career options/needs and students wanting/ needing to leave for other careers/study? How do you approach/ deal with this?
3. Comment on rural careers education in Victoria in general.
    - For example--
        i. How do you think it's/ students are faring?
        ii. Where do you see yourself/ your school fitting?
        iii. What are the biggest challenges/ opportunities for rural careers educators?
        iv. What support would you like to have?

Rural Careers Expo Chairman Questions

Personal Motivations

1. How did you come to be involved with the careers expo?
2. Why have you taken on such an active role?
3. How has working on the careers expo influenced your careers education role within your school?

Expo

1. Can you tell me about the history of this expo? (why did it start, how has it grown)
2. Why organise an expo in a rural/regional area?
3. What do you think are the main benefits of holding a careers expo in a rural/regional area?
4. What are some of the challenges of holding a careers expo in a rural/regional area?
5. Have you found mostly support or resistance from stakeholders (such as individual schools, DET, tertiary institutions, employers, etc.)? Why do you think so? How do you address the resistance?
6. Personally, how to do measure the success of the expo?
7. How do you see the expo 'fitting in' to the careers education programs in different schools?
8. How does the expo address the tension between local workforce needs and students' wants/needs to move away for further study and work?
9. How do you think the expo influences rural careers educators? What sort of impact do you think it has on their programs and/or professional knowledge?
10. How do you see the future of the expo? How might it evolve? How sustainable is it? Are there better ways to meet rural students/ educators needs?

J. Table of Participants' Towns

Data from: ABS Community Profiles (accessed 20/11/18)

Name	Town	Demography	Economy	Geography
Maxwell	**Greenfield**	**Population**: 865 **Indigenous**: .7% **English only spoken at home**: 93.9% **Highest level of educational attainment**: Bachelor's degree or higher- 11.7% Diploma/Cert IV & III- 24.6% Year 12- 10.6% Year 9 or below- 16.2%	**Employment rates**: 52% full time 36% part time **Top 3 Occupations**: Managers Professionals Labourers **Top 3 Industries**: Other Grain Growing Hospitals Combined Primary and Secondary Education **Median Weekly Household Income**: $911	**Distance to Regional Centre**: 30km

Gemma & Sally	**Westfield**	**Population**: 14,543 **Indigenous**: 1.8% **English only spoken at home**: 89.8% **Highest level of educational attainment**: Bachelor's degree or higher- 12.9% Diploma/Cert IV & III- 27.1% Year 12- 11.4% Year 9 or below- 13.4%	**Employment rates**: 54.6 % (full time) 33.8% (part time) **Top 3 Occupations**: Professionals Technicians & Trade Workers (tied) Managers/ Sales Workers **Top 3 Industries**: Hospitals Other Social Assistance Services (tied) Primary Education/ Takeaway Food Services **Median Weekly Household Income**: $1058	**Distance to Regional Centre**: 0km
Nancy	**Southwick**	**Population**: 2438 **Indigenous**: 1.5% **English only spoken at home**: 88.5% **Highest level of educational attainment**: Bachelor's degree or higher- 7.9% Diploma/Cert IV & III- 25.6% Year 12- 10% Year 9 or below- 15.3%	**Employment rates**: 54% full time 34.9% part time **Top 3 Occupations**: Community and Personal Service Workers Professionals Managers **Top 3 Industries**: Hospitals Other Social Assistance Services Other Grain Growing **Median Weekly Household Income**: $870	**Distance to Regional Centre**: 60km

Emily	**Deerfield**	**Population**: 803 **Indigenous**: .6% **English only spoken at home**: 96% **Highest level of educational attainment**: Bachelor's degree or higher- 12.8% Diploma/Cert IV & III- 24.8% Year 12- 10.4% Year 9 or below- 17.6%	**Employment rates**: 57.8% full time 32.6% part time **Top 3 Occupations**: Managers Professionals Labourers **Top 3 Industries**: Hospitals Sheep Farming Other Grain Growing **Median Weekly Household Income**: $1027	**Distance to Regional Centre**: 116km
Sarah	**Wyben**	**Population**: 2184 **Indigenous**: 1% **English only spoken at home**: 86.1% **Highest level of educational attainment**: Bachelor's degree or higher- 9.7% Diploma/Cert IV & III- 24.9% Year 12- 9.3% Year 9 or below- 20.4%	**Employment rates**: 60.1% full time 30.3% part time **Top 3 Occupations**: Labourers Managers Technicians & Trades Workers **Top 3 Industries**: Hospitals Poultry Farming (meat) Grain-Sheep or Grain-Beef Cattle Farming **Median Weekly Household Income**: $1022	**Distance to Regional Centre**: 75km

K. Table of Participants' Schools

Data from: MySchool website (accessed 20/11/18), VCE data from each school's website

School	Enrolments (2017 data)	ICSEA (2017 data)	VET & SBA Enrolments (2016 data)	VCE Offerings- Unit 3/4 (school websites)	Post School Destinations (2016 data)
Greenfield College P-12	**Total**: 264 **Trend since 2010**: Declining	**School**: 975 **Bottom Quartile**: 36% **Top Quartile**: 6%	**VET**: 6 areas 17 students **SBA**: 2	**Subjects Delivered**: 13 (2018 data from school's website 20/11/18)	**University**: 25% **TAFE/ Vocational Study**: 42% **Employment**: 17%
Westfield College 7-12 (includes Alternate Programs)	**Total**: 866 (128 Alternate Program- per school website) **Trend since 2010:** Decreasing	**School**: 961 **Bottom Quartile**: 46% **Top Quartile**: 8%	**VET**: 8 areas 155 students **SBA**: 6	**Subjects Delivered:** Not available	**University**: 41% **TAFE/ Vocational Study**: 14% **Employment**: 27%

Southwick Secondary College 7-12	**Total**: 185 **Trend since 2010:** Declining	**School**: 944 **Bottom Quartile**: 50% **Top Quartile**: 2%	**VET**: 8 areas 50 students **SBA**: 2	**Subjects Delivered:** 13 (2018 data from school's website 20/11/18)	**University**: 26% **TAFE/ Vocational Study**: 37% **Employment**: 16%
Deerfield College P-12	**Total**: 203 **Trend since 2010:** Stable	**School**: 974 **Bottom Quartile**: 38% **Top Quartile**: 7%	**VET**: 7 areas 16 students **SBA**: 0	**Subjects Delivered:** 11 (2015 data from school's website 20/11/18)	**University**: 10% **TAFE/ Vocational Study**: 20% **Employment**: 40% (from The Good Schools Guide 20/11/18)
Wyben College P-12	**Total**: 290 **Trend since 2010:** Declining	**School**: 955 **Bottom Quartile**: 46% **Top Quartile**: 5%	**VET**: 7 areas 16 students **SBA**: 1	**Subjects Delivered**: 18 (2017 data from internal school documents)	**University**: 13% **TAFE/ Vocational Study**: 13% **Employment**: 33%

L. Example of Re-storied Narrative – Maxwell

"The World According to Maxwell"

"So how [did] I end in the role? It was by accident. The person who was the careers person left and basically, I suppose, I was a senior school co-ordinator, so they just decided to make me careers person as well. That's how it sort of happened." Then he added, *"Well, at the time I wasn't exceptionally excited, but I think it's a really good role. I think that there's a number of issues which our kids from rural locations face. It was an opportunity, I reckon."*

That this was an *accident* is something of a pattern when it comes to how Maxwell described his own career progression. When he recalled how he entered the teaching profession and came to his current school, he said, *"I reckon, before I started teaching, I worked for a couple of years too. I didn't do a teaching degree. I just sort of fell into it. I did an agricultural science degree and then worked for a couple years. Then I thought I'd do a Dip Ed and then it was central placement then, so I got placed at a place called Calder."* His smile widened. *"And I still maintain if the petrol station wasn't open on Sunday night, I wouldn't have gone there because I just turned up and I thought, 'oh my God, what is this place?' I was there for 10 years which is fantastic and then I sort of stayed in the district."* He also described beginning his time working on the Careers Expo as something that happened to him. *"The Careers Expo is just something [I'm] obviously involved in through, I suppose, my friendship with the then coordinator, Steve, and when I was becoming careers teacher, he said to me – that's when I become treasurer of the Expo."*

When I arrived for our interview at Greenfield College, a school servicing a town of just under 1,000 and located amongst grain paddocks, Maxwell was starting the off-site end of year

exams. Organising these exams is just one of the many responsibilities he has as senior school coordinator. *"Yeah, VCE and VCAL and VET, yeah. So just try and keep all that afloat, and the career stuff, it just happens when there's an opportunity… So my day-to-day activities are pretty well related to that I'd say. The career stuff just sort of gets lumped in when there's an opportunity."* He returned with an acknowledgement that I *"know how it is."* I do, for two years I held a similar role in my own school, and organising the end of year exams was not a highlight. He soon spotted a student coming across the gravel parking lot and one lane road in front of the school. The student is late and lost, for the one exam he has to take in VET Furnishing. Maxwell excused himself to drive the student to his exam being held in the town hall. Upon his return, he voiced some generic frustrations with students not being organised while we walked toward one of several small buildings that make up the school. The one we entered had a silo just behind it.

Maxwell showed me into the multipurpose room he uses for student interviews. It's cramped and hosts a collection of items: mismatched chairs, a wonky table, over-filled bookshelves, various pieces of equipment, and an eye-catching expensive TV/webcam set-up. Each of the local schools was provided at least one of these with the intention to take better advantage of modern communication to conduct professional learning, hold meetings, and to conduct the largely failed West Virtual School where we could pool together specialist teachers and small student numbers in order to provide a wider variety of senior school subjects. Maxwell's not sold on the practicality of this sort of solution, *"It's going to be a big huge issue [less money from fewer enrolments] and I don't know if video conferences is the way of the future, but there's not a lot of commitment among schools… It is [a timetabling issue] but everyone's been saying that for donkey's years… The principals don't support it."*

Maxwell offered me 'the good chair,' and gave a frustrated sigh as he waited for his out-of-date laptop to turn on. He's dressed for agriculture work and seems just as likely to go out to

a paddock as he does to get in front of a class. His background in agriculture science has threaded itself through his teaching. He is the school's Agriculture teacher with a middle year's and VCE class. This alone makes him different- there are only a handful of schools with Agriculture teachers in this area despite many industries being agriculture-based. He was able to take advantage of a defunct program called *Teacher Release to Industry* early in his teaching career which he still rates highly. *"One of the really good things which I did when I was first – actually before I became a careers teacher, there was a thing called Teacher Release to Industry which is a program which went for a year, and you went and worked in an industry placement. I worked in the local [Ag] college and I wrote the first VET Agriculture school-based apprenticeship. We did all that coursework and I taught a bit there and also I did a lot of promotion for those guys. And that was really good because I got a real feel for the VET. I suppose VET is the way it's provided and the different levels and all sorts of things and teaching you some of the programs is good too, because you actually got to see what some of the kids were like, and they are not a lot different to our school kids really. So, yeah, that was really good, and I made some fantastic contacts then which I still use today, I still talk to people today. So yeah, I think we have this tendency – and they want to know that was an expensive program and I know a lot of teachers who went into it, never went to teaching again. But those who went back, some of them went out to industry for three or four years and then they came back teaching."* He lives in the district, but not in Greenfield, pointing out the importance of teachers being involved in their communities. *"I do really think it's important that teachers are involved in the community and that's something which I reckon I've seen lost a little bit, in that schools are becoming very inward looking… I still think there's room for engagement in the community, you've got to be mindful of who you are and what you're doing and all that sorts of things and maybe people aren't prepared to do that anymore, teachers I think, and yeah that's probably just*

the way things are. But I don't know, I've always kept my distance from the community which I don't live in the community I live away, and I think that's been helpful to me to a certain extent."

Once his laptop was up and running, we began the formal part of our interview. Maxwell addressed the opening prompt of "tell me about being a careers educator," with how he *accidently* became one and didn't much like it at first, then drew on the response he was writing on behalf of the local careers practitioners' network to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into Career Education Activities in Schools. In doing so, he covered the various areas of disadvantage he saw for rural students and key areas for improvement. Once he finished, he added with a smile, *"It's the world according to Maxwell."*

Maxwell is quite active in the network and he often talks about the big picture issues facing rural students and educators, rather than just how they play out in his school. He is the chairman of the committee that organises the Careers Expo each year and has been involved in it since his early days as a careers educator. To be clear, assisting with the Expo committee is not part of his role description at Greenfield College. He, and the other committee members, volunteer their own time because of the benefits they see in it. Maxwell works hard throughout the year on the Expo since being co-opted into it from his friend Steve, who started it in the early 1980s, and saw it through a time when *"I thought we were insolvent, where we were virtually insolvent. We were in trouble, yeah."* In the hectic weeks just before the Expo, he's glad of only working .8 at Greenfield so that he can *"go and spend [time] there, two or three hours at the venue just making sure everything's organised and stuff."* The Expo is an important event in the region, attracting more than 2,000 students and turning over a budget of roughly $100,000 annually, not bad for a *"two-bit operation."*

Changes and Challenges in his Role

Over his time as a careers educator and teacher, he has watched the population of Greenfield change. During the interview, Maxwell outlined some of the changes that he has encountered:

"*When I first came here there was – the school was very aspirational in that a lot of the farming community had aspirations for the kids and so that meant going away to acquire another skill, whether it be a trade skill or whether it be a university degree or something like that. And then, if they wanted to come back and work on the farm, that was all fine. We've had a real change in demographic. I think regional Victoria has. Now we haven't got so many of those kids with an ageing agricultural community. We haven't got many farm kids, not as many as we used to, and now we've got kids off a lot of kids whose parents who are attracted to our region because of the cheap housing. So, the demographics have changed substantially.*

"So anyway, we've had to change as well. We had to look at some of the things we deliver and how we deliver them, and also some of the advice which we give to the kids as well. So, the key thing, which I think is a huge issue for rural kids, is aspiration. Somehow, we have to try and change their career aspirations. And because of the nature of our demographics and how they have changed, a lot of kids aren't exposed to a range of- I suppose professional role models. That's always been the case in the country, but now we've got kids whose parents occupy particular types of employment, if they are employed. And so, what we've got to do is, we've got to try and address that.

"Well over the years, some things we've tried to do with some of the primary kids is we've run a Raising Aspirations Program whereby we've taken to local providers and local employers and all sorts of things, but that didn't happen this year. We try to introduce, I suppose, professional role models when we can to all of the kids, right across the board, if we can. What we are on – we are trying to change our focus a bit I think towards doing things with younger

kids and I think that's probably is the way forward, especially in our region, I think. And yes, so the aspirational stuff is an ongoing issue. It's a huge issue.

"So once upon a time, we had kids who are, you know, very determined to, I suppose, to gain qualifications, so that that would lead them on to further jobs. These days- I just did a career survey with some Year Seven kids and interestingly, like it's a really broad one, but interestingly, the kids who underperform[], they don't like anything. They really don't like anything. They might like one thing, one aspect or one type of job type, I suppose. So the kids who are struggling really don't like much. The kids who are sort of, in probably the middle grounds, haven't yet made any sort of decision about what they like and what they don't like. And some of these kids, like, decision making is a huge issue for some kids. It is a huge issue, and so really we've got in the middle ground, we've got kids who sort of rate different employment outcomes all about the same, about eight or 10 different areas. And then we've got often the high performing kids who rate a particular area very, very highly. So that's really interesting. I think that was [an] interesting idea because I've got a junior maths class and I actually did it in the maths class, and yeah, it just really reinforced to me where some of these kids are at and some of the issues which you then have to confront."

As a careers educator, Maxwell spends most of his time with the senior students and recognised the complexity of his role. *"So I think you're going to [have]… a bit of empathy. Increasingly, I'm dealing with kids who have had difficult backgrounds and stuff, and you got to be able to appreciate that. You've got to be able to be flexible. You've got to be able to think laterally at times, I think…. You almost need to case manage these kids, I think, through the later years, and this is something which, when I first started, we didn't even have to think about, and that probably occupies two thirds of my time now… you must learn to lead them through from go to whoa."*

He reflected on the role and influence of parents, including how it has changed over time. *"They talk about engagement with parents, but it doesn't really mean much. I don't think so, especially regional schools. And it's got to do with the nature of parents too, to a certain extent. I know parents are a lot busier and everyone's - well a lot of parents are working, some parents aren't working. But yeah, you talk about engagement with parents but we don't engage like we used to… You've also got, especially I think in regional areas, we've got a lot of kids now who are exposed to generational unemployment. The parents come up here because maybe they don't have to work when they are up here, or they haven't got enough money to buy a house. They're far enough away from a regional centre that they don't have to work now…*

"I can remember when I first started that we had these kids, and they were great, they were rough diamonds, pretty rough, and they had a bad background. And I remember talking to the principal at the time saying, 'They haven't got any values' And he directly said to me, 'We don't teach values to them at school. What we do is we teach information and content, that's what we teach. That's what their parents do.'

"I don't know when it was, probably in the late '80s, early '90s when the government recognised that giving money to parents was wasteful because they never spend it on what they're supposed to. So, they started channelling people['s] money to schools, and then all of a sudden we're supposed to be teaching them values. I don't know, so I think – yeah. It's really important these days, but it shouldn't be. I don't think- it shouldn't be, so someone's not doing what they're supposed to do and I would suggest a lot of parents have got a lot to answer for probably."

He seemed concerned that a decline in student work habits may affect their future employability. This puts their Work Experience placements at risk as well as his ability to offer a broad variety of experiences to other students. *"And so somehow we've got to get them*

[students] in a space whereby, you know, they're happy to go to a regional town or to Melbourne. Yeah, just absolutely huge." We spoke about the Work Experience Camps that both our schools usually take to Melbourne and all the additional benefits to students besides learning about a profession. *"Yeah, it's [Melbourne Work Experience Camp] fantastic and it's been about being self-sufficient and having to make decisions for yourself when there's no one else about and all that sort of stuff. I mean that's invaluable, absolutely invaluable, but yeah I just – I don't know, I'm not sure. I think our program needs to be revitalised, but I give them [students] lists of employers which we've used, so you know, probably I know 60 employers, but they won't write an email or … ring them up. They won't do any of those sorts of things. The six kids who are really keen that – and yeah, this years' lot, as I said, out of I don't know, 30 kids, four of them actually managed to go to Melbourne and I did all the legwork for the placements. So, I'm not going to do the legwork for 30 placements. Once upon a time I probably would do it for 10 or 15 that I had time to do it, now I haven't got time. So, it's then back to them."* He had a suggestion that could make this part of the workload slightly easier. *"I think Work Experience opportunities in Melbourne is – now I know you can get actually employ people to place kids for you, you can pay the money and they'll do it for you. So that's fine if you've got the money, but like in the state system I really think that we need to listen and coordinate so that students can readily access information. The way to do that would be a bit like the SWLs, the work placement stuff which has been done by the LLENs and it's all listed and then you sort of apply and away you go. And I think that would be good, now whether it's all already happening I'm not sure, but I'm unaware of it."*

Maxwell recalled an incident with one student who lacked a strong understanding of his chosen trade. *"That's one thing, kids they never – when you put them out on Work Experience, when I first started, they were never like they were at school- suffer a bit of a pill at school or didn't do what they're told at school or something like that or a bit precious- they go to Work*

Experience [and] they'll be fine. That is no longer the case. I don't know why that is, but that's why I always encourage them to get part-time work. I had a kid, he's working with a bricklayer. All he wanted to be was a bricklayer. So, his first day working he had to cart, I don't know, couple of pallets of bricks out front and he had to cart him round the back of this flat. So, it was a pretty narrow sort of opening. He had to cart them through and take them up to the brickie who was putting them up at the back. So that was his job for the day, to cart bricks. Anyway, he couldn't use the barrow, so he had to get about – he'd probably get about four or five bricks in one arm and get there through as quick as he could. Anyway, he started with five, by about 10:30 he was down to one at a time. So, the brickie rang me up, and by the time we got there he was just sitting on top of the bricks and I said, 'You better go back to school, mate.' So he couldn't last, and it wasn't – he couldn't last two hours carting bricks. I was just thinking, 'Oh my god, what are you going to do, boy?' So anyway, it's interesting. And he's probably gone to a great career in unemployment unfortunately."

The Positives

Maxwell has accumulated a significant amount of practical, contextual knowledge over his, *"I reckon, I don't know, 10 years probably,"* of being a careers educator. This has served his students and the wider network well, especially as the demographics of his town have changed-pathways are no longer just to universities. He identified this as his greatest strength or at least the reason why he hasn't been given the sack. *"I think I've got a good appreciation for all your pathways. All the jobs I've had in my life haven't always been that glamorous, I think, but we need people to do a whole host of different things, we do. And if you work at Woolies on the check out and you're positive contributors to society, you've done well. So, I don't necessarily devalue employment opportunities or outcomes depending on what the jobs are. And also, you*

know, I think it's really important that people have productive lives. So, that might mean going to university for some, but for a lot of kids it doesn't mean that. It might be like our good friend who almost missed the exam, being a factory hand at a local furnishing place. And if he does that properly and he's got regular income, good on him because he will be a positive member of society. I know he will be."

He further elaborated on the value of understanding a variety of pathways for students. *"I reckon my knowledge of local industry is reasonable, I think. I reckon I sort of know what's going on around the place. So yeah, it's getting kids on for, you know, harvest work or that sort of stuff. I sort of know all those pathways. It's reasonable, the university stuff, I think that's reasonable. I think I'm sort of up-to-date. I don't think I'm – because I only go to the CEAV conference and hear some people – they often are from private schools, carry on about their careers program and not once thought, try an internship, apprenticeship or just work mentioned. I understand that they have got a different client base, but we're in the public system and there's a reason I'm in the public system, I think. I don't know, I think I've lost that reason a bit sometimes*. So, everyone needs to have an equal opportunity, that's what I'm on about probably. That would be the basis of my philosophy that everyone should have – even if I disliked them."*

*<u>Clarification</u>: *The reason I am in the public system is because of where I have come from and a belief that "Everyone should be given equal opportunities in education and to be successful in life (whatever that may mean for that person). This is a view instilled in me by my parents and reinforced in the various positions I have held in work and in the community.*

I am still firm in this belief but get disappointed with the divide in education between the haves and the have nots. The inability of governments to fund schools on a needs basis is exasperating. The continued derision of the state school system is frustrating. The way schools are being measured is inconsistent and doesn't reflect a lot of good work being done by teachers. The inability of the system to

*concentrate on anything for more that 2 years is consistent and has lead to a throw away culture amongst leadership. The quality of leaders being selected for principal positions in the regions is a huge concern and needs to be addressed.**

This breadth of knowledge and experience, along with his appreciation of various pathways, helped lead him to develop a program to intervene with younger students. *"So, the thing called Hands on Learning, which is fantastic- we get a tradesman in for one day a week and he's got a group of 10 kids who don't attend school normally. They turn up every Wednesday and basically they've been building things. They do all sorts of projects around the town and stuff and they organise lunch. We've got fantastic instructors. It's been going for about five years now and I reckon that in education things get around and you see them come 'round, but this is a really good one. This is really worthwhile. We've had good outcomes out of it in terms of kids turning up to school, so I think it's a really good thing. But again, that's addressing the problem in the middle school, and also, we've even had primary school kids in it, and that's a good investment [of MIPs funding] and it needs money I reckon."*

His experience has also led him to have some concerns about students being able to access the programs they need for their pathways, especially in the senior school. *"In terms of [the] provision of VET and senior VCE options, with declining enrolments we need to have a really good hard look at how we do that in the regional locations currently. And with declining enrolments, that means you can't run as many VCE subjects and we have to have a good hard look at how we might be able to give kids opportunities … which includes video conferencing of subjects. Now, there hasn't been a proper commitment in our region towards video conferencing. We've got all the gear and it sort of sits around the edges, but yeah we need a firm commitment by all schools to be involved, and that's not happening just currently, unfortunately. So in terms of outcomes, I've heard from video conferencing and distance ed, I've heard various*

people say that they're not as good. Probably not, but I think if the kids are committed to doing the subject, that you can get just as good an outcome. But yeah, it's going to be the reality I think, of the next probably five years, that if you can have a senior component, that you are going to rely fairly heavily on video conferencing if you're going to run a variety of VCE subjects. And kids vote with their feet. If they can't get the VCE subjects, they won't- we have a lot of our kids, especially a lot of our good kids, what they'll do is, at the end of Year 10, they will go to private schools in Ballarat probably, and they'll board down there. We have had a couple of kids going to Westfield College because they can't get the subjects they want here. Like all schools, we do our best, but unfortunately, we just haven't got the staff to be able to offer it. So, I reckon that's a huge challenge."

Despite what he considers the many challenges of the role, he enjoys it and is proud when students find their path. *"And it's good fun, especially if you get a good outcome. It's great if you see a kid three or four years down the track and they'll be driving down the main street of Westfield in a nice vehicle and they pull up, they say, 'Good day, how're you going?' And you find out where they work and what they're doing, all those sorts of things. They've got a partner, got a house, all that sort of stuff, that's really good. Or we have at our Year 12 presentation- I was trying to get Year 12 graduates from years ago to come back and speak. This year we had a guy, he joined the Navy, he actually worked around here for a bit then he joined the Navy. He was a submariner for about 10 years and now he's a policeman. And it's just great to see those kids succeed, it's good. That's the best bit, is seeing kids down the track, that's what I really enjoy and find out what they're doing and to see some of the kids who I might have assisted their departure from school. Saying, you know, 'It's the best thing that ever happened to me, you kicking me out.' We have kicked a few out over the years unfortunately. You're not allowed to do that anymore."*

Concerns for Local Careers Educators

While he has been able to assist students in developing successful pathways, he voiced concerns about career education programs in other schools. Several times he raised issues about the professionalism of careers educators in schools. *"I think it's really important that all of our careers counsellors are qualified. I know that there's a tendency in local, and some of the local schools, to put people in who may or may not be qualified, and if they're not qualified, they should be getting qualified. And they should be supported in that, in obtaining their qualifications. Also, I think as part of the role, you need to have a little bit of knowledge about the local, regional, and state-wide employment opportunities and that's something that's really important- to be involved in CEAV and to attend conferences, do all sorts of things. And also to be involved in your local careers teachers' group, because if you're not doing that, how do you know what's going on? I think that isolation – because of the nature of what's happening at regional schools' declining enrolments, all those sorts of things, people [teachers] end up a whole heap of different jobs because there isn't as many kids. One of the things which does happen, is that those schools become very inward looking and it's all of a sudden altruism and, you know, looking after the greater good of regional schools sort of goes out the window and everyone is just worried about their own little patch of turf. Now, that's fine, but you need to be in contact with others so that you know what you're saying or your knowledge is current, and I reckon that is a huge issue. Also, given that we do have declining enrolments, what's happening is that careers teachers' allowances and allotments are being reduced. And if you haven't got the time, you're not going to be able [to] provide the quality career advice because you're not going to be able to find the kids, and actually, if you're teaching you haven't got that opportunity."*

He identified the network as a key way for careers educators to stay up-to-date with their professional knowledge, but acknowledged that it is difficult to attend. *"Our careers network is*

surviving. Unfortunately, I think it's got a lot to do with what's happening in schools. It's harder for careers teachers to get out and get to the network meetings, so we've sort of had times- we're down to bare bones. We're really fortunate in that all the teachers are very supportive of the things which we're doing, but probably for the last two years unfortunately, our focus has been on just getting the Expo up and over the line and getting it all done and probably our network meetings – we do have guest speakers, but yeah it is getting harder and harder to get people out of schools to attend network meetings. And the great thing about network meetings is it's the sharing of ideas and also just being able to talk to other people about what they're doing, how they're doing it, and all those sorts of things, and making sure that everything you are talking about is current, up to date and factual, which is really important."

The issues associated with an overcommitted workload, the difficulties in deciding which of the important things there is actually time to do, was another complaint. Continuing with an analogy of juggling too many balls, Maxwell identified it as the worst part of the role. *"I think being over committed, that's the worst part... You're trying to keep more in the air, that's the worst bit. I mean there's times in your life when that's going to happen, but increasingly they keep adding balls, 'Here's another one.' I think you don't juggle as well, I think if you're overcommitted, you don't juggle as well, and you see stuff which you could have done, but you didn't do it. You think, 'Maybe I should have done that,' but anyway, you just can't do it sometimes. That's life. I think probably it's got to do with juggling balls now in terms of kids. I'll give them probably two opportunities. So, I've set up things from once or twice and then, once upon a time, I just keep going. Now if they don't rise to the occasion, I'll move on to someone else again… which is a shame. It is a shame. But you do have to accept a bit of responsibility for what you do, and increasingly kids are finding that hard to do and they can't make a decision. They cannot make a decision, I reckon. And it's because decisions are always made for them, maybe all the way, I'm not sure. I'm sure our parents said exactly the same*

things, but they are very needy a lot of kids these days, very, very needy. And the bottom line is sometimes things don't work out, and it's about resilience…

"There's a couple of programs which we've used, but we always get the good parents, we don't get the parents we want to see, so it's a little bit disheartening really. So, probably engaging with parents that would be a good thing to do, but again, how do you do all that sort of stuff and continue engagement with employers and go around [to] talk to employers? Employers like you to turn up and have a bit of a yak, not just about careers but just about life in general, and establish that relationship and then away you go. You know, you can have kids there, but it's very hard to do all that sort of stuff if you're teaching Year Seven Maths. So that's, I think, probably the administration needs to appreciate that, right across the board, that if you want to have good relationships with community, parents, lots of one-to-one activity with students and things, you've got to support that. If you're not going to support that's not going to happen.

"Things like school-based apprenticeships, like we've been really successful with that in terms of getting kids placements, but sometimes they lead to jobs, sometimes they don't, but a lot of that is about going and finding the spot or talking to someone and suggesting to them, 'Yeah it's a good way to have a look at a kid, rather than putting them on this full-time apprenticeship. You can have a look at him for you. If you don't like him, there's no commitment.' There used to be a lot of group training people out and about promoting those sorts of things, that's no longer the case either. So yeah, any school-based which happen these days is pretty well set up by schools, most I think. And yeah, again, if you haven't got the time to pursue those sorts of things and provide – often it can provide an issue with particular kids, the boss or the coordinator will come in and say, 'Such and such, what are you going to do with him?' And then you sort of have to try and find him something.

"It's the same with work placements. If you're teaching [in] the VCAL area, it's really good because you get access to kids all the time, but if you're not, it's very, very hard to find them and to get them to do anything. And it's a motivation thing, so often you need with those kids, I was talking about case management before –set up the placement with the employer, set up a meeting, take them to the employer, talk them through what's going on, get them there the first day, and then everything's pretty fine. Everything generally works from there on, but all that stuff takes a lot of time which we probably haven't got as much of."

His concerns about unqualified careers educators in schools were compounded by the turnover of local educators and the gap this creates in local knowledge. He identified these people as *advocates* for rural students *"old Patty from up at Plymouth, she was a great advocate for kids who have to travel and all that sort of stuff"* and mentors for new careers educators, *"It was a very well established group. You knew everyone and if you had a problem, you'd just ring someone up, and now there's probably only – you know, probably a couple left."* While we joked about there being only a few left, Maxwell was quick to point out he was *"probably one of the younger ones in the older group."* He holds Steve up as a big loss to the region. *"Having lost Steve too… It's a huge issue, it's a huge issue for new people. Because he'd go out of his way to… to help a man, yeah… So if someone asked him a question, he was great, he was really good… And now, if you just turned up and you had a careers question, what do I do?"*

With the loss of local knowledge and the habit of some local schools to put unqualified people in the role, Maxwell would like the DET to provide some more support- but he's not holding his breath. *"I would really like – we had a sort of a careers development coordinator who was just fantastic, really, really good and a regional careers coordinator. Unfortunately, we lost that in the Catholic system, when her role was no longer. And so, I really think that again, if we're serious about careers and careers teachers, we need to support them in some way. And she was fantastic in that she would bring new information to meetings, organise guest*

speakers, do all sorts of things for us. And if you ever had a problem, you can ring up her the next day. If there's any sort of issue, you rely on your network. And that's why it's important that we maintain our networks and keep them going, and the teachers are actively encouraged to engage in their networks because things are changing all the time and information which might have been current six months ago, may or may not be current currently. So we need to try and stay informed if we can." He went on to comment about her replacement, based three hours from Westfield, in less glowing terms. *"We never see him, and I think they are actually no longer going, so yeah, we are a bit out of that one, to a certain extent. But anyway, and that was just about making sure that your careers program had some sort of structure. Lots of good information about maps and all [those] sorts of things, which was great. So yeah, anyway, that's not the case anymore. Probably will come back into vogue at some stage, but not just currently…. The use of a regional person is … great, yeah generally it's … fantastic. But yeah, we haven't got any of that anymore. I despair about things like Work Experience and work placement, all those sorts of things. I just hope people are doing it properly… So anyway, everyone does things differently and that's fine. But it's just good to have someone around to remind you about stuff and make sure you're all right … that was good, the timing stuff… Yeah, but whether or not that's going to, oh I don't know, it might happen again, who knows?"*

Challenges for Rural Careers Educators

His concerns about careers educators magnify what he considered to be some of the biggest challenges for rural careers education namely: declining enrolments, appropriate MIPs provision, VET access, Work Experience opportunities, principals, and the seeming disconnect between policy makers and those on the ground. He described these as problems affecting many rural schools and networks, including his own. *"Well you know, I think declining enrolments is*

probably our biggest issue." This is a root problem because it makes programs proportionally more expensive- a chunk of school funding is tied to enrolment numbers, so less students equals less money. At what point do the financial concerns outweigh the educational benefits? It's a constant question for schools, and difficult when there is little understanding of careers education. Many of the key activities associated with careers education have significant costs attached to them that need to be covered by the school, families, or a combination of both. While schools receive MIPs funding, principals can decide how best to spend the money. This seems to produce mixed results in Maxwell's opinion- the Hands on Learning program at his own school is an effective use of these funds, but he has concerns, particularly about the schools with principals that do not have a strong understanding of what careers education should be, that try to satisfy their MIPs requirements by simply attending the Careers Expo. *"I've heard a lot of principals hanging their hat on it basically in terms of MIPs provision and all sorts of things, because, dare I say, that a lot of MIPs program [are] not real good."*

VET programs have considerable costs for both the school and the families. *"I think that VET provision in our schools is also another big issue. Cost of VET provision in schools is increasing and I think kids who want to go on to apprenticeships or traineeships, those sorts of things, VET is a great opportunity for them. We run a model whereby everyone goes out to VET on Wednesdays and there's a lot of co-operation between schools, which is fantastic. We need to preserve that, we need to make sure that that gives all small schools opportunities to access VET programs that they couldn't deliver themselves and also it makes sure that a large variety of VET programs get up and about and run each year. Again, it's an ongoing issue, finance is an ongoing issue, and I'm not sure what we can do about that. I think maybe in terms of the model, the financial model, that I believe that there should be some sort of lightening in there for schools or students who have to travel a distance."* Maxwell elaborated on the travel costs. *"I mean like the fees and stuff too, especially with some of our kids, I'll enrol them, make sure they*

go to orientation day, get them going for the first three weeks, and then when they say, 'What am I going to do about the fees?' then we worry about it then. Because if their parents saw, 'I have to pay a couple of dollars,' some parents would commit, others would go, 'We haven't got any money.' So give up the fags for a couple of weeks or so and you'll be all right. Yeah, I don't know, so there's no real easy answer." He spoke more about the VET buses, which are partially subsidised and service most of the local towns, but require long days from students and roughly $10 a week for travel. *"That's something else which we need to keep in the back of our mind. Schools, but also the RTOs, need to keep in the back of mind, you know, people are getting on the bus at nearly 7:30… Well, Granville it's 7:15 or Flowerstone. And the commitment for those kids to come down is fantastic and you got to congratulate them for that, I think that's really, really good. I think we need to keep that in the back of their minds when we're making decisions because a lot of our decisions can be based around what suits probably the bigger providers in town. Yeah, so we need to sort of keep in mind... If you just get on your bike and you're there in five minutes, I mean how easy is that compared to some kid who's sitting on the bus for three hours or maybe more to get there and back. So yeah, so those guys should be supported in some way, shape, or form surely, I reckon, because that's a huge disadvantage. It's a huge disadvantage. Yeah, so there is a conveyance allowance which is three parts of bugger all… I think what I would do is I would ask each school to give a calculation for the number of kids and how much it's going to cost them on the public transport, give the money to the school, and the school can distribute the money out, that's the way I'd do it. And I don't think - well I'm not sure, I don't know how [much] it costs you. You'd have to have some sort of cut off when you're 30 kilometres or something you know. Yeah, I do feel sorry for some of these kids who for two years are travelling on a Wednesday, travelling –three years in a bus."*

He also identified the costs and travel as hindrances to providing strong Work Experience programs. *"We have always run a Year 11 Work Experience program in Melbourne whereby*

the kids go to the youth hostel and stay there and do all of their work placement in the city. So they have to get there themselves on public transport and all those sorts of things. That as the years have progressed, it's been getting harder and harder to get kids to actually to commit to that. Generally I'll take about a dozen kids down. This year we got four and all those placements were organised. So kids aren't prepared to, I don't know, put themselves out to sort of get going. We are going to try and address that next year, in that we might try and do it in Year 10 and try and make it part of their structured – like put a bit more structure into it. But when I first started, we used to get 20 or 30 kids go to Melbourne. All the Year 11s would go to Melbourne, now I'm struggling to get four or five to go. And I think that's, we're probably one of the regional schools in our area who's persisted with it and tried really hard to keep it going, but now it's becoming a real issue.

"And some of the feedback from parents is, 'Well, you know what's the point?' It's a little bit of – there's issues about our kids going away and some of their parents haven't maybe necessarily experienced city life and all those sorts of things. So yeah, that's a bit of a problem. Also we haven't [got] any really large employers in our area, so we're always relying on the goodwill of local employers. I think that's something which I suppose is pretty common amongst careers teachers, and we've got some really good employers, but in the city I find it's getting harder to get placements unless you actually know people and you need to have – we've had kids go to places for years and years and they are always happy to have country kids because country kids are more likely to engage and get on with it. But yeah, I think a little bit of assistance in placing kids or some sort of encouragement, whether that be some sort of financially covered internship, maybe in terms of transport subsidies, those sorts of things, I reckon they would go a long way. It probably cost us $350 for the week for the kids to go away and then they've got to meet all their food requirements as well, so that's probably – that might be another $200, $250 too. So that's a fair investment from their parents really, and especially their parents having a

lot of money. So yeah… No well, I reckon Work Experience is probably – like I know of schools down at Eagleton and down there in the western districts, they used to run three weeks of Work Experience in Melbourne for the kids - I mean that's fantastic. It was a huge commitment, huge commitment, but their school community recognised that their kids are going to have to go away at work."

Maxwell also has some frustrations about the OH&S restrictions in rural industries, along with the increase in safety requirements and associated paperwork. *"Another issue with regional Work Experience is this notion about – I was talking about agriculture here, that they're not allowed to go near an animal. Why? I really think that we need to sort of have a good look at some of the regulations and requirements. I mean OH&S is really important and it shouldn't be down to the career [teacher] to go out there and inspect all the work sites or anything like that, but if they're [students] just going to observe… no, no one wants to do that. And increasingly when I send out – because with the employers I send out things like the list of prohibited activities and I always get phone calls that say, 'What do you mean they can't do that?' I say, 'They're not allowed to do that.' If they are a VET student and they've done all their OH&S competencies and maybe machinery operation competency, fine, no worries. Manual handling, fine no worries. But yeah, I don't know… I don't know, I'm not sure what the answer is there. So, I think the animal stuff drives me nuts and it puts employers off. It does, it puts them off. So, it's all too hard and by the time you finish reading the list, 'Well what am I going to do?'"*
These restrictions are not helpful to give students a hands-on experience learning about work. *"Anyway, I think Work Experience is – and also kids with part-time work, I'm a great advocate for kids working part time, it's fantastic. So if they can get some work somewhere, they will know what it is. If it's paid employment, I guess, it's just fantastic. So I encourage kids, well in this subject I teach, Get a Job, that's one of things which you look at, how do you get a part time*

job. We do all those sorts of things. Anyway, and we've had a couple of kids get jobs out of it, which is all good."

According to Maxwell, one of the important obstacles that rural careers educators face is their principals. He identified some communication and trust issues between principals and careers educators. *"It's [careers education] not about telling people what to do, and someone needs to tell the principals that it's not about telling people what to do. That's not career advice. It's not. You've got to listen to them and that's really important, and trying to get to some sort of outcome which they're happy with and that's the important thing."* Maxwell is also concerned with the quality of principals in rural schools. *"I think in terms of leadership of a lot of regional schools, and I reckon this has got impacts on our career programs, there's not a broad field of applicants anymore, and as a result some of the people who are up in leadership positions probably haven't really got the experience they should have. I don't know, maybe they just haven't got skills which are quite - I'm not sure, but I think that's becoming increasingly an issue in regional schools. The inability of people to absorb what's going on… But it's always easy to blame someone else, of course."*

The issues with principals extend beyond their individual schools. In recent history, there had been some tension between the careers' network and the principals' cluster meetings. *"There was and I think – we had a bit of a bad patch with the principal group which wasn't related to the Expo committee… And that was related to an outburst by a previous VET coordinator at a principals' meeting one day and it just rubbed him [head of the principal's cluster] up the wrong way. But we're back on track now, yeah we're back on track. I see it as being valuable. I do see it as being valuable. A lot of them have never been [to the Expo] and that irritates me beyond belief, and so we try to put on a morning tea to get them to come along. This year we had one – like previous years we had a couple which was good, but yeah – I think it's – because this is something which is run and they [haven't had] any input into and that's*

made them - they just know it's going to happen. But now that there's actually some financial contribution, fair enough, we can walk and wear that, but until previously, I reckon that it wasn't a really important aspect of their career program. And there was no buy in from them at all. So initially, the buy in came when they were suspicious as to what we were up to, but – I think it was last year or the year before, we had a meeting, the Christmas meeting, and about four of them turned up and they also came to sit down here, 'Bloody, what's going on here?'" Maxwell grinned. *"But fortunately, we were, as always, very well organised and spoke through a few issues and all that sort of things. Interestingly, half of them had to go talk on their mobile phones or something like that when they realised that we were right. I reckon they were after us then, but now I think we've sort of freshened up our approach to them and that's something we need to be mindful of, because it only takes one or two. And it's this notion about people saying stuff in hearsay and all that sort of stuff which – if you've got an issue you raise it, but you come to the Expo and see what's going on I reckon."*

The problems and finger-pointing associated with poor communication also came up when Maxwell spoke about the current Parliamentary Inquiry. *"I reckon it happens about every 10 years there's an inquiry. It's like the local Ag College, about every 10 years someone has a bright idea of, 'Let's have an agricultural high school.' And of course they go great guns, and politicians love that sort of stuff because they can say, 'Oh yeah, we'll do this and this and this.' And there had been inquiries in that, and I just said, 'You know anything about the VET Ag program? Do you know anything about school-based apprenticeship?' 'No, no' and you're just thinking, 'Oh my god.' Anyway, I don't know, if anything positive is to come out of the inquiry. It needs to be sort of a structural thing and given that it's going to involve money – what I would hope is that they could reinstate regional coordinators and do something of that. That would be good. That would be useful. It wouldn't cost too much. If there was one thing which came out of it- that would be great. Generally, what comes out of it is that the careers advice which*

students are receiving is no good and it's down to the careers teachers. So, I think, yeah I don't know, I'd be interested to see what happens. But yeah, I don't expect too much will happen probably… Basically, nothing ever changes. So yeah, we do have these waves, but I don't know."

The Careers Expo

Many of these issues were reflected in his discussion of the Expo itself. *"So anyway, but yeah, so that's [why] the Careers Expo is so important, because these kids they'd had to go to Ballarat, had to go to the Melbourne Expo at Caulfield, they'd have to travel, you know if you're in Deerfield, you might have to travel five hours to get there and five hours home."*

The Expo itself grew from a single-school undertaking to a regional event in part because of how well it addresses the needs of the local communities. *"Westfield College [has] always been, because Steve was there, and actually the Expo started after Steve, a guy from Antsville and a guy from Greenfield went to a – there was a careers' in-service three days at Danvers, and they went over there – and this would be probably early '80s maybe, something like that. And they went over there and there's this notion about having a career fair was sort of put forward. So, then it started at Westfield College. It was in the stadium – not the stadium, the Presley Hall there, at the front there, and it was there for a very long time, and then we just made a decision. When I working at the Ag College, we exhibited there. I remember that it was just kids going everywhere, picking up stickers and doing all sorts of bad things. So, it wasn't enough room, so we decided to go out to the field days site and that was when- probably the year after – yeah it was the second year, that's when I came on-board as a careers teacher, at the field days site, which is a great location, but anyway. But for a two-bit operation, we go alright.*

"Because really, we are looking at getting, you know, 2000 kids from all around the place getting in one location. It's great for the tertiary providers, it's great for the RTOs, and it's great for the kids. We try and mix it up so that there's lots of different things happening and if you want specific information you go to seminars or you can go and talk to stallholders, or you can actually go and try a trade and have a go, different bits and pieces, talk to the VET providers, so it's good. There's lots of really good outcomes come out, I think.

"We're turning over, I don't know, probably – I'm trying to think how much it would be this year. In terms of turnover when we look at it, I don't know, I'll say the wrong figure, it'd be over a 100,000, just in terms of ins and outs and licensing. So there's a lot going on… so yeah, we'll probably be turning over, over 100,000. Lucy could give you the figure, which is great, we're just a bit of a tin pot organisation really. Anyway, yeah."

Maxwell spoke highly of the dedicated people who helped the event to grow and the instrumental Steve most favourably, albeit with a bit of humour. *"But yeah, I think the Expo itself is a great thing… but I think we're really lucky in that we had Steve to navigate… the ship, except for the year he had his heart attack, which was very inconsiderate of him, very inconsiderate. And we've been very lucky, and I think we made a substantial effort in the last four years to get a sustainable model and we got it. So when I fall off the perch that means that whoever takes it on doesn't have to…*

"Yeah, there's plenty there, and we've got a really good staff. We've been so lucky because with the original, we had we employed someone who's our EO, and she was more trouble than what [she] was worth. It was just terrible. She was really, really bad at what – the one we've got now, she is spectacular, really well organised… and [has] got great ideas and is always looking – she's right into event management and she's always looking forward, you know, how can we do this in terms of business now, and those sorts of things. She knows stuff

that we as teachers don't know, like in terms of getting that program up this year and all sorts of things. That thing only cost about two grand and we get coverage- over… [a] thousand went out in the local paper because of all the sponsorship deals she put together. We can't do that… And who do you ring and how do you deal with them and we don't do that stuff. But that's a real movement forward having a good executive officer." Supporting the executive officer is the Expo committee. *"[On the] committee, so there is… Lucy, me, Joan, and Gemma and we get it…. The Westfield based crew… And if we can, some of the guys hang around after the careers [network] meeting, which is good. But so, we need to make them quick and half an hour- bang. So, we don't want to be sitting there scratching our heads, it needs to be pretty tight agenda. But yeah anyway, it is what it is I suppose."*

The problems he associated with the turnover of careers educators extends to the Expo as well. He's concerned that with the experienced careers educators retiring and many of the newer careers educators burning out, there is no one to take up the leadership of the Expo in the long term. *"The Expo is a priority, I think it should be a priority for a reason. And we've been lucky in that we've had people who've been able to carry it on, carry it through, but that sort of planning for [the] next generation, I'm a little bit concerned about that. And we need to try and identify someone pretty soon… So I think the current, well the way careers teachers are, I suppose the average age, but also the way people are being engaged at their school, it's getting harder and harder to get anyone to put their hand up to administrate, and that's why I'm very concerned that you're going to Frankston, Melyssa."* Maxwell made a joke of it, but I had been part of the committee prior to resigning to concentrate on my research.

Not only is the committee leadership a concern for Maxwell, but so is the stability of the volunteer-based committee. *"Because I see it is as being a really important thing, but something else which I'm a little bit concerned about, is this notion amongst our group and network, and because it's so much harder to get people there, it's so much harder to get people to actually do*

things on behalf of the Expo. On the day they were fantastic, but anything else… it's very, very hard to get people to commit to things and that's something else which we need to be mindful of now… And one of the issues, because we had a launch last year, we always have a launch with free drinks and food and stuff to try and get people involved on the committee, but they come to the launch and then you never [see] them again. So really, it's the working committee is probably, you know - we do a lot of work and then take it to the careers' meetings and then the teachers ratify and we move on from there. But yeah, it would be good to get a bit more industry involvement. But they're under the pump, they can't just walk out for two hours or something… I think the end of this year's Expo, because we always have a bit of a debrief, you've been to a couple… but we don't have that opportunity to just – everyone's just so busy. And as you say, it's about priorities. We need to try and keep that keep that going."

Despite the challenges, Maxwell says he continue with his work on the Expo. *"Yeah absolutely, and it works well for me, and I enjoy. It gets a bit stressful around the time, but I still enjoy it. It's good to be under a bit of pressure if it doesn't hurt, and it's good pressure. It's different to school pressure, school pressure is different. It's good to get your head out of the mud and look around and see what other people are up to, and that's really good and to be able to engage with employers and to be able to engage with providers and stuff is all really good and that's always been a positive experience, the Expo for me, always been positive."*

Maxwell ended our interview by smiling and confessing to being "*boring*" before adding, *"Hopefully, you can get something out of it."*