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PhD Thesis

**Leaving Town? Differential Effects of Geography on Youths’
Higher Education Aspirations
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**Leaving Town? Differential Effects of Geography on Youths' Higher Education
Aspirations.**

Submitted by

Nicola Ann Cull

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Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).

Nicola Cull

ABSTRACT

Researchers and theorists have long documented a link between social capital and educational outcomes, a relationship that may be of particular importance in rural areas where geographic isolation and smaller community sizes can foster distinct social structures. This PhD thesis investigates the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations, in addressing the critical issue of persistent disparities in higher education outcomes between youth in rural and urban Australia.

Aspirations play a pivotal role in shaping education outcomes. Additionally, there is increasing focus on social capital as a key explanatory factor for educational outcome disparities, including those in higher education outcomes between rural and urban areas. While many factors shape higher education aspirations, this thesis focuses on social capital. Therefore, the overarching aim is to further understand the role and importance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

Using a mixed methods research approach, I attempted to bring quantitative and qualitative data together to examine this relationship. The research comprises three studies; two empirical quantitative studies which apply multilevel modelling techniques on data collected from 10,370 students nationally across rural and urban Australia, and a qualitative synthesis of 108 studies. Furthermore, I used differences in higher education aspirations as a proxy for whether youth in rural Australia perceive higher education as a real choice for them.

My findings in Study 1 indicate that youth in rural Australia experience differences in both quantity and type of social capital compared to their urban counterparts, with geography serving as a significant predictor of social capital. Youth in rural Australia were found to experience more social capital overall than their urban counterparts, including across four out of the six social capital measures examined. Further, my findings revealed an important disparity; youth in rural Australia experienced less of the forms of social capital positively

associated with higher education aspirations, and more of the forms of social capital negatively associated with higher education aspirations, compared to their urban counterparts. Thus, the disparity in likelihood of aspiring to higher education for youth in rural Australia may reflect the type of social capital they experience rather than simply the amount.

In Study 2, my analysis found that social capital is a practically and statistically significant mediator in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. However, this mediating relationship was weaker than expected. A strong relationship between geography and higher education aspirations was revealed even accounting for social capital, underscoring the significance of geography and the structure of rural, in shaping youths' higher education aspirations. While much of the relationship between rural status and higher education aspirations remains unexplained, social capital was a meaningful mediator that should be considered. Critically, my study found a significant disparity in the likelihood to aspire to higher education between youth in rural and urban Australia, with youth in rural Australia significantly less likely to aspire. Thus, indicating that they do not perceive higher education to be a real choice.

My findings in Study 1 and 2 complicate simplistic assumptions that policy and interventions merely need to increase social capital to improve higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas, and yet reinforce the continued need to consider social capital as part of a well-rounded intervention and policy approach.

In Study 3, I sought to enrich the picture of the role of social capital through a mixed methods approach. I undertook a meta-synthesis of 108 qualitative studies on the relationship between rural status and higher education aspirations. Social capital emerged as a significant but not sufficient explanation of the link between geography and higher education aspirations. Hence, it is suggested that consideration be given to other likely important factors in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. Such as, the structures of rural and urban, which in turn shape policies, resource distribution, and consequently, choices

available to youth in rural Australia. The goal being to inform the development of equitable policies that provide youth in rural Australia with a real choice to aspire to and access higher education.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This thesis focuses on the role and importance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. Chapter 1: Introduction (current chapter) provides a brief overview of the entire thesis, background information on the topic, epistemology, theoretical framework, areas of research, and methodological approach.

Chapter 2: Quantitative Methodology outlines the background and methodology used for the two empirical quantitative studies in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital (Study 1) employed an intersectional quantitative methodology to explore the relationship between geographic location and both the amount and type of social capital experienced by youth in rural and urban Australia. The use of a quantitative methodology was crucial in providing generalised findings at the macro level for these populations. The analysis was conducted with six individual social capital measures: student-teacher relationships, influence of peer networks when thinking about the future, participation in school-based activities, participation in sports, and participation in volunteering activities.

Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations—A Mediation Analysis (Study 2) builds on the findings presented in Chapter 3. This allowed for a more in-depth quantitative examination of the social capital findings from Study 2. Multilevel modelling was used to examine the relationship between geographic location and the probability of aspiring to higher education for youth in rural and urban Australia. Additionally, a multilevel mediation analysis was performed to determine if social capital is a likely mechanism in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations and to quantify the mediation association of social capital in the relationship.

Chapter 5: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth Living in Rural Areas is an empirical qualitative systematic review of 108 studies. It aimed to build collective understandings from a large body of literature relating to higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas.

Finally, Chapter 6: General Discussion and Conclusion, discusses the main findings and considers possible explanations and additional likely important factors in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. This discussion draws on the findings from Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital, Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis, and Chapter 5: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review.

Introduction

“Where you live matters. In our capital cities more than 48% of 25 – 34-year old's have a degree. In regional Australia just over 20% of 25 – 34-year old's have a degree. In the more remote parts of the country, it's around 16%. It's even worse than that for our Indigenous brothers and sisters. The figure is less than 10%. Where you live, how much your parents earn, whether you are Indigenous or not, is still a major factor in whether you are a student or a graduate of an Australian university...I don't want us to be a country where your chances in life depend on your postcode, your parents, or the colour of your skin...But that's where we are today.”

Minister for Education, Jason Clare (2022)

The influence of geography on higher education aspirations and outcomes in Australia has become a topic of significant concern in recent years (Naphthine, Graham, Lee & Wills, 2019; Parker, Jerrim, Anders & Astell-Burk, 2016). Research has consistently indicated that youth in rural Australia have lower levels of higher education outcomes compared to their urban counterparts (Naphthine et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018). This persistent disparity in higher education outcomes for youth in rural Australia was highlighted in the Australian Governments' National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy – Final Report (2019).

Moreover, the recent once in a generation government review of higher education in Australia, The Australian Universities Accord Report (2024) emphasises the central role of equity in higher education as a driver of skills growth in the country. Specifically, the report emphasises the significance of meeting higher education equity targets for students in regional and remote areas, to achieve the skills targets necessary for national country growth.

Despite the efforts made by the Australian government, in recent years, to address these disparities there has been a continuing decline in the representation of youth from rural

Australia in higher education. Critically, one key factor identified as contributing to these disparities is the notable difference in aspirations for higher education between youth from rural and urban backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Parker et al., 2016). Research has shown that youth from rural locations are less likely to aspire and apply to higher education to the same degree as their urban counterparts (Naphthine et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018). Consequently, increasing aspirations for higher education of youth from underrepresented groups has been a key policy strategy employed by the Australian government, including youth in rural areas (Bradley et al., 2008; Burke, Bunn, Parker, Mellor, Brown, Locke, Shaw, Webb, & Howley, 2023; Cuervo, Chesters & Aberdeen, 2019).

Additionally, in recent years the concept of social capital as a strategy to explain and address disparities in education outcomes, including for youth in rural areas, has gained significant attention because of the documented positive association between social capital and education outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002; Israel, Beaulieu & Hartless, 2001; Dufur, Parcel & Troutman, 2013; Semo & Karmel, 2011). However, despite numerous strategies and interventions a persistent gap in higher education outcomes between youth in rural and urban Australia remains.

Education aspirations play a vital role in determining educational outcomes. Given the declining representation of youth in rural Australia in higher education and the increasing importance of higher education qualifications for future employment, it is crucial to conduct further research that explores aspiration formation, including higher education aspiration formation, for youth in rural Australia. Further, due to the increasing use of social capital in educational policy and research it is important to understand the role and importance of social capital in rural areas (Bradley et al., 2008; Edwards, Franklin, & Holland, 2003; Holland, Reynolds & Weller, 2007).

Research in rural areas remains understudied. Although, there is a small body of literature exploring social capital and educational outcomes in rural areas, there is less

research that has explored social capital and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. Given that rural communities often have distinctly different social structures to urban communities due to their geographic isolation and smaller size this is of particular importance to explore (Beggs, Haines, & Hurlbert, 1996; Allcott, Karlan, Mobius, Rosenblat & Szeidl, 2007).

This research seeks to understand the role and importance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. The aim is to contribute to policies and strategies that can enable a real choice for youth in rural Australia to aspire to higher education, thus increasing higher education aspirations and attainment.

While this research focuses on the Australian context, it is important to recognise that the challenges associated with the rural-urban divide in higher education are not unique to Australia. Globally rural areas face similar disparities in higher education outcomes, including in countries like USA, Canada, and the UK (Trahar, Timmis, Lucas & Naidoo, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006; van Maarseveen, 2021; Graetz, Friedman, Osgood-Zimmerman, Burstein, Biehl, Shields, Mosser, et al. 2018). By examining the Australian context, this research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential strategies for overcoming the rural-urban divide in higher education more widely.

Literature Review

Education, including higher education, is recognised as essential for the economic, political, cultural, and social development of a country (Committee for Economic Development of Australia [CEDA], 2018; Halsey, 2018). Educational attainment not only contributes to an individual's wealth, health, and overall wellbeing, but also ultimately contributes to broader social and economic benefits for society (Committee for Economic

Development of Australia, 2018). The recently published Australian Universities Accord Final Report (2024) emphasises the vital role that higher education needs to play for Australia to realise its full potential as an economy and society in the coming decades.

The report highlights that 90% of jobs to be created within the next five years will require post-secondary education qualifications, with 50% requiring higher education qualifications. To meet these demands, an additional 300,330 Commonwealth-supported students must be enrolled by 2035, and by 2050, an even larger increase of 900,000 Commonwealth-supported students will be necessary to ensure that 55% of the workforce possesses higher education qualifications. Moreover, the report establishes equity parity targets as a priority. This means that among the additional students, 53% should come from regional and remote areas. As a result, achieving equity in higher education for youth in rural Australia has now become a central focus.

Equity in education is crucial to ensure that geographic location, social class, gender or ethnicity do not negatively impact a child's potential for educational attainment (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2016). Research has shown that where a child lives influences their educational aspirations, attainment, occupation choice, and income, with place effects being particularly significant during a child's teenage years (Chetty, Hendren & Katz, 2016; Deutscher, 2018).

Notably, a rural-urban higher education divide is prevalent globally (Trahar et al., 2020). The lower participation rates of youth from rural areas in higher education, combined with lower attainment rates, is a common theme in rural research throughout the world (Trahar et al., 2020; OECD, 2016). The impact of rurality is not only problematic in lower income countries, although these populations are particularly vulnerable, a rural-urban education divide continues to hinder progress towards equitable higher education in many higher income countries, including Australia, USA, Canada, and UK (Naphthine et al., 2019; Trahar et al., 2020; Stelmach, 2011).

Differences among countries reveal varying relative advantages for youth in rural areas. Factors like geographical size, population density, and socioeconomic history contribute to differing impacts on access to and participation in higher education for youth in rural areas in different countries. In smaller countries with higher population density, such as the Netherlands and Germany, there is a less evident rural-urban divide in access and participation in higher education.

Conversely, large countries with lower population density, like Australia, the USA, Canada, and Norway, experience negative associations between distance and higher education participation (Frenett, 2004; Newbold & Brown, 2015; Turley, 2009; Parker et al., 2016; Spiess & Wrohlich, 2010). This has prompted policy focus on enhancing access across challenging geographies. Interestingly, despite the UK's similarity in size and population density to the Netherlands and Germany, a recent study suggests that similarities in the negative association of distance on participation in higher education with Canada, the USA, and Australia, due to comparable wealth distributions and socioeconomic histories (White & Lee, 2020).

In Australia, where over 75% of the population resides in urban centres (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004; Baxter, Gray & Hayes, 2011), higher education opportunities are concentrated in cities, with limited options in rural areas (Parker et al., 2016; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). Only a small number of students in rural Australia can remain in their communities if they wish to participate in higher education, mainly due to proximity to regional campuses or online study options, the majority of students however have to relocate to urban areas (Naphthine et al., 2019; Cuervo, 2016; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). This is a similar situation in the USA and Canada, interestingly there is some evidence that Norway's recent decentralisation of higher education provision has produced some positive outcomes on improving access to higher education for students in rural areas as well as underrepresented

groups such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. However, overall disparities in participation and attainment for youth in rural areas continues in most countries.

Australia's large area, similar in size to mainland USA and about twenty-four times the size of the UK, coupled with a relatively small population (just over 23 million), impacts resource distribution, particularly in rural areas (Burke et al., 2023; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Baxter, Gray & Hayes, 2011). Similar to the USA, rural areas in Australia, which are often disconnected from urban areas that have the majority of the resources, face geographic isolation resulting in reduced access to employment and inadequate educational opportunities, including secondary schooling and higher education (Halsey, 2018; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). This situation contributes to increased overall poverty in rural areas (Bertolini, 2019; Alston, 2000; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Weber & Jensen, 2004; Rodríguez-Pose, & Hardy, 2015). In Australia, many rural areas are also classified as low socioeconomic areas (Rural and Regional Committee [RRC], 2011; Gale & Parker, 2013).

Further, limited access to resources and services in these area leads to additional time and costs, further hindering access to higher education, especially for Australians in rural areas who are, in general, more economically disadvantaged (poorer) than Australians in urban areas (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010). In an increasingly globalised world, there is a risk that social divides based on class, wealth, and participation in the knowledge economy may increase, underscoring a belief that individuals with the highest level of education will be the best equipped to thrive in today's global economy (Atherton, Dumangane & Whitty, 2016). In Australia, this divide is evident in the contrast between rural and urban areas.

In the context of Australian higher education, equity policy addresses access, participation, and attainment for under-represented groups who are experiencing social and economic disadvantage, specifically students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Indigenous students, and students in regional and remote areas (Bradley et al., 2008). Students

in regional and remote areas have been classified by the Commonwealth government as an equity group due to their historical underrepresentation at the university level. This has resulted in significant additional funding through the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program being allocated to higher education institutions. The funds are for implementation of widening participation programs designed to increase access, participation, and attainment for students in rural Australia. Many of these programs aimed at increasing the number of students from underrepresented groups in higher education focus on raising aspirations by building social capital through relationship-building activities, mentorship, and demystifying the higher education experience. These initiatives aim to foster a sense of belonging and expand networks so students feel motivated to pursue higher education. Additionally, there has been further investment in community-based regional university hubs, and regional student loading funding (Naphine et al., 2019).

However, despite significant funding and increased policy focus on students in rural Australia in recent years, the participation rates in higher education of these students have decreased further and continues to decline (Naphine et al., 2019). This is, partly because of contemporary challenges arising from rural restructuring due to globalisation, technological advancements, cost of living crisis, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has further exacerbated the rural-urban divide. As a result, there is some urgency to address the issue of low participation and attainment of higher education for youth in rural Australia to ensure the economic and social development of rural communities and for the country as a whole (CEDA, 2018; The Australian Universities Accord Final Report, 2024; Naphine et al., 2019).

Growing up and receiving an education in rural Australia can provide young individuals with valuable opportunities to develop interpersonal skills, resilience, and resourcefulness, however, despite these advantages, youth living in rural areas are significantly less likely to hold university (higher education) qualifications or higher-level

vocational education and training certificates by their mid-twenties compared to their urban counterparts (Naphthine et al., 2019). Australians in urban areas are twice as likely to possess higher education qualifications compared to their rural counterparts, with only 19.5 percent of rural residents holding higher education qualifications compared to 42.2 percent of urban residents (Naphthine et al., 2019). Moreover, data from Australia's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveals a decline in student academic performance as the distance from urban centres increases (OECD, 2016). Rural areas consistently exhibit a strong correlation with lower educational outcomes, creating an educational disadvantage for youth in these areas (Halsey, 2018).

Further, there remains a significant disparity in higher education access based on socioeconomic backgrounds. Youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are three times more likely to access higher education than their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim, 2016; Mills & Gale, 2010). Notably, youth from high socioeconomic backgrounds in urban areas tend to achieve the highest levels of higher education attainment, whereas those from low socioeconomic backgrounds in rural areas have the lowest attainment levels (Harvey et al., 2016; Mills & Gale, 2010; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis, & Stephanou, 1999). This is important to note as there is a significant intersection between rurality and poverty for many youths living in rural Australia (James et al., 1999; DEEWR, 2010).

Importantly, the disparity in higher education attainment stems from the lower likelihood of youth in rural areas applying for higher education (CEDA, 2018; Naphthine et al., 2019). Critically, it is suggested that a key factor contributing to these lower application rates for youth in rural areas is a lower likelihood to aspire to higher education compared to their urban counterparts (Bradley et al., 2008). As such, further research is needed to explore aspiration formation, including higher education aspirations, for youth in rural Australia.

Youth living in rural areas often face the necessity of relocating to urban areas for higher education, underscoring a significant transition that can impact their educational and employment outcomes. Important research has identified several broad groupings of factors that shape higher education aspirations for youth, including social, economic, cultural, and geographic factors like distance and mobility required to access higher education (Elder & Conger, 2000; Elder, 1998; Carr & Kafalas, 2009; Parker et al., 2016; Turley, 2009; Frenette, 2004, 2006; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004; Cuervo et al., 2019). Notably, social capital, social ties to family and community, emerges as an important factor in this context.

There is unlikely to be one solution to increasing higher education aspiration for youth in rural areas. Nevertheless, in recent years, the concept of social capital has attracted much interest from policy makers and educational research. Specifically, to explain and address education outcome disparities, particularly between youth from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds in urban areas.

Several themes have emerged positively linking different forms of social capital to better education outcomes, including teachers as role models, participation in extracurricular activities, social networks, the influence of peers and family, and the influence of participation in community activities which increases a person's social capital (Halpern, 2005; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Semo & Karmel, 2011, Coleman, 1988, Edwards, 2004; Fullarton, 2002; Banks, 2010). Additionally, youth with positive attitudes towards their school have been found to have higher educational aspirations and educational participation (Semo & Karmel, 2011; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004; Ellison, Wohn & Greenhow, 2014; Thomson & Hillman, 2010). Thus, increasing social capital for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as low socioeconomic backgrounds, has been positively linked with better education outcomes.

Critically, there has been increasing interest in social capital as a likely mechanism to explain and address the higher education outcome disparities between youth in rural and

urban areas. Social capital has been highlighted as a factor in youth development and educational attainment for youth in rural areas (Israel et al., 2001; Byun et al., 2012).

However, much of this research is from the USA, less is known about social capital and the Australian rural context.

Moreover, relatively little research has explicitly examined the role and importance of social capital in higher education aspirations, which are one of the most important predictors of youths' educational attainment (Homel & Ryan, 2014; Halle & Portes, 1973). Additionally, there is a gap in understanding how the social processes of social capital impact the formation of higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas, particularly across varying social-demographic backgrounds (socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and Indigeneity).

In summary, whilst social capital is often drawn on to explain how youth can mediate the effects of disadvantage to successfully attain better education outcomes this is not always explicitly tested. In addition, there is less nuanced evidence exploring how geography (rural and urban) might contribute to differences in social capital experienced by youth in rural Australia. There is even less evidence that explores geography, rural and urban, at different locations of the intersection of socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth, and gender, and how this might further shape social capital and, through it, higher education aspirations.

Further, when considering social capital as coming in different forms it is also not clear that youth in rural areas would be lower in all forms of social capital. Critically, the significance of social capital as a mediating factor in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia remains less understood.

My thesis attempts to investigate the relationship between social capital, geography, and higher education aspirations, in addressing the critical issue of lower higher education outcomes for youth in rural Australia. Using a mixed method approach, this thesis explores

the gaps in the current research to investigate the effects of geography on higher education aspirations and the role of social capital as a likely mechanism in this relationship.

Aspirations

Aspirations play a vital role as key motivators influencing educational and occupational decision-making, ultimately shaping life chances for youth from rural areas (Bradley et al., 2008; Homel & Ryan, 2014). Notably, educational aspirations have been found to be significant predictors of educational attainment, underscoring their importance when examining lower higher education outcomes for youth in rural Australia (Homel & Ryan, 2014; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Parker et al., 2016).

Numerous factors influence aspiration formation for youth as they plan for life after school including economic, social, cultural, and geographic factors (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Fray, Gore, Harris & North, 2020). In my research, I will consider individual aspirations as outcomes shaped by social, structural, and historical forces within the context of available resources and the likelihood of achieving those aspirations (Nussbaum, 2011; Appadurai, 2004).

The goal of education and economic policies is to enable the greatest number of real choices for people rather than constraining their options. This study will use higher education aspirations as a lens to examine whether youth in rural Australia have the same number of choices as their urban counterparts. In other words, do youth in rural Australia perceive higher education to be a real choice. I use differences in higher education aspirations as a proxy for whether rural youth perceive university (higher education) as a real choice for them.

Within the current dominant political landscape of neoliberal education and economic policies, educational achievement tends to be seen as the result of a person's individual innate ability, potential, and hard work, with little examination of societal and structural inequalities (Ball, 2014; Burke, 2013). Consequently, this has given rise to dominant deficit discourses that propose "raising aspirations" of youth as a solution, locating the issue of lower higher

education aspirations with the individual rather than acknowledging societal and structural inequalities that impact on aspirations in the first place (Ball, 2014; Burke, 2013; MacLeod, 2009). Whilst, the political environment is not the focus of my thesis, it is important to acknowledge, as this is the environment within which youth in rural areas are forming aspirations. This will be important in interpreting and contextualising the results of my studies.

Further, it is important to note, that whilst I am focusing on higher education aspirations in this research the aim is not to attribute different values to any particular aspiration or chosen path in life for youth. Rather, this study uses higher education aspirations as a lens into how geography shapes aspirations in general for youth in rural Australia. Additionally, my intention is not to compare youth in rural Australia to youth in urban Australia in a way that frames youth in rural Australia as deficient in aspirations rather I aim to avoid reproducing deficit through paying attention to systems and structures of inequality (Burke, 2013). Noting the change in the structure of the labour market higher education is increasingly critical, and why it is an important lens for this research, but I note there are a number of other critical outcomes of relevance to youth in rural Australia that are worthy of research.

Social Capital

Social capital can be defined as the resources to which individuals or groups have access through their social relationships (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998). The concept of social capital has gained much interest in both social sciences and economics, particularly in the context of research on social stratification and social inequality (Windzio, 2013). The relationship between social capital and educational outcomes has been explored over many years by education researchers and social scientists (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Dika & Singh, 2002; Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Lin, 2001). Additionally, findings by economic analysts that indicate correlations between social capital and favourable economic, health, and

education outcomes have further increased the interest in social capital (Woolcock, & Narayan, 2000).

The notion that social capital can be converted into other forms of capital (cultural and economic) has been appealing to policymakers seeking solutions. As such, social capital has been drawn on as an explanatory factor to assess advantages of relationships and networks, particularly for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, in addressing education outcome disparities (OECD, 2001; Stone, 2001; Coleman, 1988; Chesters & Smith, 2015). For instance, studies have indicated that youth higher in social capital were more likely to overcome disadvantage, participate in, and attain better educational outcomes (Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Sandefur, Meier & Campbell., 2006; Semo & Karmel, 2011; Coleman, 1988; Israel, Beulieu & Hartless, 2001; Crosnoe, 2004).

However, it is important to recognise that the concept of social capital is complex and has been subject to criticism, specifically, the assumption that social capital is inherently positive for youth has been problematised (Bourdieu, 1986; Dika & Singh, 2002; Morrow, 1999; Bassani, 2007). As a theory it has been explored through various perspectives and defined and conceptualised in different ways (Dika & Singh, 2002). This complexity arises partly because it is a theory that attempts to explain complex social processes (Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Portes, 1998).

To date, much of the strategy, research, and intervention implementation in the field of higher education has taken a normative approach to social capital (Burke et al., 2023; Dika & Singh, 2002). Many studies use a social network and relationship concept of social capital to explain its role in youth's development of aspirations and attainment in higher education, indicating that it is the size and strength of their networks and social connections that influence educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988). This understanding tends to argue that youth with more social capital are more likely to aspire to and attain better education outcomes reflecting a normative approach to social capital (Burke et al., 2023).

As such, strategies have tended to focus on increasing social capital in individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). However, without engaging in Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which is concerned with power, this approach can be problematic as it may result in a deficit approach (Morrow, 1999; Burke et al., 2023; Gewirtz, Dickson, Halpin & Whitty, 2005).

Further, it is important to note that while I am focusing, in part, on differences in social capital experienced by youth in rural and urban Australia, the aim is not to attribute normative values to youth based on the social capital they experience. Rather, this study aims to avoid a deficit approach, where social capital is defined by something lacking in unsuccessful individuals, families, and communities. Instead, I aim to use social capital as a lens to explore social processes and structures that can reproduce advantage or disadvantage, specifically, in relation to higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. This understanding of social capital will be outlined more fully in the theoretical framework section later in this chapter.

Contemporary Rural Living

In the last thirty years rural areas in Australia and around the world have undergone significant economic, social, and political changes as a result of globalisation and neoliberal politics (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Cuervo, 2016). Industry and employment in Australia are continuing to undergo rapid transformation due to technological advances, anticipated changes from artificial intelligence, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, rural restructuring, neoliberal policies, and extreme weather, such as drought and floods, are further impacting rural areas. Consequently, many rural areas are now facing unique challenges that are different from urban areas (Corbett, 2007).

Increasing our understanding of the complex contemporary situations of rural communities and their effects on both individuals and communities is important. We need to understand the contexts in which youth in rural areas are forming their aspirations, as well as

the impact on their access to higher education. For instance, neoliberal policies have impacted rural areas both economically and politically. Farming areas in rural Australia were once seen as important and the backbone of the country. Thus, if these areas were experiencing problems, then the whole country was concerned. However, in recent years, there has been a decline in the economic importance of the agriculture sector resulting in a perceived decline in importance of Australian rural areas (Brett, 2007).

Additionally, advances in agricultural technology, resulting in large farms requiring fewer workers, coupled with severe drought conditions, has led to fewer farms and less farm employment (28% in 1933 to 3.3 % in 2007) (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research [DIISR], 2007). Further, the technological changes in farming have transformed farming into a highly skilled profession, leading to a fundamental shift in the rural labour market, and a reduced demand for low-skilled workers (McSwan, 2003; Lobao & Meyer, 2001; Marshall, Turner, Richards, Foth, Dezuanni, & Neale, 2021).

Similar experiences have been observed in the USA and Canada, where significant shifts away from farming as primary livelihood strategy have resulted in a substantial decline in the numbers of farmers. Furthermore, the remaining farmers face increased challenges, primarily as marginal producers in an industry that is becoming more concentrated (Dimitri, Effland & Conklin, 2005; Lobao & Meyer, 2001).

The decline in the farming industry and farming employment has caused many rural areas in Australia, and similarly in the USA and Canada, to struggle socially and economically. Hence, more rural areas have become low socioeconomic areas. Moreover, the resulting impacts of rural depopulation (from 43% of Australians living in rural areas in 1911 to 12% in 2007), school closures, and loss of public services has changed the role of rural communities, and many rural areas can no longer service their local populations adequately (McKenzie, 2004; Alston, 2007). Consequently, there has been an increase in social exclusion

for youth in rural Australia, due to a lack of access to education and employment opportunities (Alston & Kent, 2003, 2009; Webb et al., 2015).

As such, in Australia, as well as in the USA and Canada, rural areas are increasingly becoming peripheral to national economies and societies. This shift results in loss of meaningful contact with and understanding of rural places and people and is evidenced by a tendency for rural issues in politics to be viewed as peripheral in policy agendas (Freshwater, 2007; Halsey, 2018). For example, in Australia only 6 members of the 150-seat Australian Parliament represent people living in rural areas which makes up 78% of the landmass of the country (IRRR Review discussion paper, 2018). This has a further impact on the vulnerability of rural areas and the people who live in them, including youth.

In various regions worldwide, including Australia, the USA, Canada, and Europe, as previously noted, many rural areas have become low socioeconomic areas, resulting in a concentration of disadvantage (Weber & Jensen, 2004; Bernard, Contzen, Decker & Shucksmith, 2019). There is a significant intersection between rurality and poverty, affecting many people living in rural Australia. Furthermore, higher rates of youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds are found in rural areas compared to urban areas, with a third of regional students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Consequently, many rural schools are disproportionately likely to educate youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds (DEEWR, 2010; RRC, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2013; James et al., 1999; Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Similarly, in the USA high poverty and persistent poverty are disproportionately found in rural areas, with higher rates of poverty in rural areas compared to urban areas for both the overall population poverty and child poverty (Bernard et al., 2019; Farrigan, 2014).

Interestingly, in contrast to many countries the UK's rural poverty rates are slightly less than urban poverty rates. (Bernard et al., 2019). However, despite recent interest rural poverty remains a relatively under researched area.

The connection between rural poverty and limited educational opportunities is crucial. Educational attainment is closely linked to lifetime earnings, and individuals whose parents have lower educational attainment often achieve less education themselves. Consequently, low educational attainment becomes a contributing factor to the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Addressing these intersections is essential for devising effective strategies to break the cycle of disadvantage in rural areas.

However, not all rural areas in Australia are in decline, some coastal areas and mining towns prospering both economically and socially. The prosperity of these towns has led to a growing dependence on the service and mining sectors in the rural economy (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; McFarlane, Blackwell, Mounter, & Grant, 2016). Thus, the decline in farming, coupled with the rise in the market driven service economy (e.g., tourism) and increased importance of natural resources industries (e.g., mining), has led to a change in rural land use. What was once farming dominant has now become a more multifaceted, complex, and heterogeneous landscape (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Russel Smith & Sangha, 2018; McFarlane et al., 2016).

In rural research, therefore, it is important to consider the heterogeneity of contemporary rural areas, and understand their different economic, demographic, cultural, historical, and geographical backgrounds. As such, I have adopted a mixed method approach, using quantitative methods to gain generalisable macro-level findings which can identify patterns of inequity, and a qualitative systematic review to enable more contextualised understandings.

Why is Rural Research Important?

Rural areas play a pivotal role, globally, as the primary sources of our daily food, energy, and water resources (Halsey, 2018; Millar & Roots, 2012; Ejaz Qureshi, Hanjra, & Ward, 2013). Additionally, present-day ecological and food security concerns have placed rural regions on national and global economic development agendas (Cervone, 2018; Corbett, 2016; Ejaz Qureshi et al., 2013). Furthermore, recent events, such as the COVID-19

pandemic, have underscored the critical importance of food security not only for Australia but also for the world. Simultaneously, the sustainability of the environment, including climate change mitigation, is an ever-pressing issue.

“Without food, we are clearly nothing. It is not a lifestyle or add-on fashion statement”
(Pretty, 2002 p. 11).

Food production, environmental stewardship, water management, and energy sourcing reflect the traditional roles and origins of rural communities, all of which are underpinned by higher education and training (Halsey, 2018). Both the food production and resources industries have become increasingly high-tech. Consequently, there is a growing need for individuals with higher education qualifications to work in these industries within rural areas (Halsey, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021). Moreover, the rise of the digital economy has created new job opportunities, necessitating a highly skilled and qualified workforce in rural Australia (Vichie, 2017; Hajkowitz, Reeson, Rudd, Bratanova, Hodgers, Mason, & Boughen, 2016). Concerningly, the Productivity Commission (2016) found that the growing demand for highly skilled workers due to technological advances has widened the wage gap between urban and rural areas, with people in urban areas earning higher salaries (Halsey, 2018).

Despite the critical roles played by rural areas, rural research is often positioned on the periphery (Corbett, 2016). In both the USA and Australia, approximately less than 10% of educational research has focused on youth living in rural areas and rural education. This lack of rural research is concerning as educational disadvantages experienced by rural youth can negatively impact entire communities (Halsey, 2018).

Due to globalisation, digitalisation, and the global knowledge economy, a university degree (higher education) is now more crucial than ever for youth to be able to pursue different career paths, including in technically orientated sectors such as farming and agriculture (Marshall et al., 2021; Dibden & Cocklin, 2007). Unfortunately, these forces tend

disproportionately affect youth in rural areas due to lower higher education outcomes compared to their urban counterparts (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black & Lhuede, 2001; Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1999, 2000a; Cuervo, 2016). Therefore, addressing the issues of lower higher education aspiration and attainment for youth in rural areas is of critical importance.

Additionally, as previously mentioned, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (2024) emphasises the significance of meeting higher education equity targets for students in regional and remote areas, to achieve the skills targets necessary for national country growth. To achieve this target, Australia must ensure that more youth from rural areas can attain higher education. Aspirations play a pivotal role in influencing educational attainment, so to achieve the Accord Report's target and contribute to Australia's broader societal and economic development, it becomes imperative to further understand the formation of aspirations for higher education for youth in rural Australia and as such is the focus of my research.

Implications for My Research

In the review of literature, I have attempted to link, synthesize, and clarify the research that spans across the area of rural research, social capital, and higher education aspirations. I will now emphasise some of the implications that are the impetus for my investigation. From the literature it is clear that the factors that shape aspiration formation for youth in rural areas can be seen as complex and develop within the geographic, social, and economic context of rural areas, families, and communities (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). Further, whilst there has been a focus on strategies to increase higher education aspirations, and the use of social capital as a mechanism to do this, there is a need not only for more research on youth in rural areas in general, but also a need for more nuanced research. Specifically, for research that can gain

deeper insights into aspiration formation and the complex relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

My research will draw on a mixed method approach in an attempt to examine the relationship more comprehensively between geography and higher education aspiration formation, specifically exploring the degree to which social capital is a mechanism in the relationship. Quantitative research is vital as it can provide generalisable results at the macro level allowing for persistent patterns of inequity to be seen in relation to higher education aspiration. Additionally, a quantitative element in this research is essential to provide quantification of the strength and significance of relationships between the variables in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations providing valuable insights which would not be possible with qualitative methods alone.

The qualitative element is important in contributing to the deeper insights and contextualised findings, as well as drawing attention to the heterogeneity of youth and rural communities. Qualitative research offers rich data highlighting the complexity of diverse factors, and interactions between them, within the wider context of geography, political, economic, and social contexts. However, such data has not been fully drawn on as it cannot be easily categorised in a way that can inform and lead to nuanced and practical solutions. Hence, it is clear that there is a need to find ways to combine quantitative and qualitative research to comprehensively examine the effects of geography on higher education aspirations, and the role of social capital in this relationship for youth in rural Australia.

In addition, there is a need to find a way to understand and categorise the rich qualitative data, within the wider quantitative data, in such a way that practical outcomes can be developed. Areas of further research needed to contribute to addressing this gap include building a collective nuanced understanding of the qualitative research in this area, intersectional research, and quantitative research for a fuller understanding of the effects of

rurality on higher education aspiration formation, and particularly the role of social capital in this relationship.

Through these areas of research and critical analysis, a framework to assist with categorising and understanding qualitative data can be developed, assumptions can be interrogated, and more complex understandings formed through integration of quantitative and qualitative research leading to a range of responses that are both nuanced and practical.

Epistemology

Critical Realism

My thesis aims to generate deeper insights into the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. It is important that I adopt an epistemological approach that is aligned to my key themes, aims, and methodology, and with a reflective practitioner approach. My research is taking the epistemological approach of critical realism. This epistemology will underlie the entire research process and guides the theoretical perspective of my research design framework which informs my choice of methodology and research methods. Critical realism understands that it is possible for social science to improve its knowledge over time about the real world, and to make claims about reality which are reasonably justified, whilst continuing to be historically contingent and changing.

In other words, critical realism combines explanation, rather than description, with interpretation. It sees people as active in constructing their own world, while also shaped (constrained or enabled) by structures that have real effects (Sayer, 2000). The interaction between structures and human agency as central to understanding social phenomena is core to critical realism (Houston, 2010). My belief is that “rural” and “urban” are social categories (structures) which have real effects on people. However, they are mediated by social action

and interactions. I will use the social category of “rural” as the foundation to understand the more complex layered heterogeneity of the social world.

My research will draw on critical realism to examine lesser known social phenomena in higher education aspiration formation for youth in rural areas and the interplay between structure and agency. In endeavouring for deeper insights and understandings my research will integrate a nuanced analysis of social processes and power dynamics, using tools from social constructionism (e.g. use of language), and feminism (attention to power and knowledge). The central concern of the relationship between individual agency and social context will be addressed in critical realist terms, and the role it plays in educational phenomena. My research explores the perspectives of youth, their families, and community members, and considers mechanisms such as social structures, systems and processes that constrain or enable higher education aspiration formation and attainment.

This research requires a perspective that acknowledges the existence of an objective reality (the influence of social structures and processes regardless of how people perceive or experience them) whilst recognising the presence of subjective reality constructed through human knowledge and discourse (Houston, 2010). A critical realism approach allows insight into how people interpret and give meaning to their experiences, and how these perceptions align with the enabling and/or constraining the effects of objective social structures (Houston, 2010).

According to Houston (2010) critical realism perceives social structures as having “durable enduring patterns of behaviour, social rules, norms, and law-like configurations” (p. 75) that have real effects on people’s lives. Bhaskar (1978) points out that “we will only be able to understand, and so change – and so change – the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses... These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable pattern of events; they can only be identified through practical and theoretical work of the social sciences” (p.2).

Critical realism is useful for research in higher education aspirations and attainment because if there are unjust social structures or systems causing inequitable developing social practices, identifying and changing those structures and systems could result in more equitable outcomes. Critical realism will enable identification of various social processes that drive the processes of both inclusion and exclusion which will be an important contribution to higher education aspiration and attainment for youth in rural areas studies more generally.

Another advantage of the critical realist approach is that it is well suited to both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In my research, the use of the critical realist approach will allow me a layered exploration of different realities, dynamics, and perspectives, through the use of mixed methods (both quantitative and qualitative studies being undertaken). This approach requires me as a researcher to be reflexive, being particularly mindful of bias, and how the researcher can influence the scope and nature of the data collection, interpretation, and analysis, as well as being mindful of examining assumptions and reflexively exploring findings from the research. Such research can generate deeper insights into subtle social processes and provide a more nuanced understanding of the tensions, mechanisms, and dynamics critical for examining phenomena that can create change.

Theoretical Framework

I will now outline the theoretical framework, informed by a critical realism epistemology, which serves as a guide on which I will build my research.

Applied Developmental Science

The project considers the influences of the rural context, family, community, and the individual on youths' aspirations for higher education. Bhaskar's critical realist work of 1978 presents a seven-domain model which demonstrates how complex, multi-layered, multicausal interconnected interacting influences operate at different levels. The seven domains are: the person, situated activity, social setting, culture, politics, economy, and ecology. Bhaskar's

model (1978) shows how inequalities are created and sustained at the system level, collective level, and individual level.

In my research, I will draw on a similar tool, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to guide my research. Bronfenbrenner's model comprises of micro, meso, and macro levels (outlined in further detail below) within an applied developmental science theory and framework. The ecological systems theory draws attention to the multiple contextual influences on human development and behaviour, including individual characteristics, as well as family, school, and community setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1998). The theory emphasises the need to explore multiple contexts when studying youth outcomes, highlighting the interrelationships among these contexts and the need to pay attention to how they affect youths' daily lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1998). This approach is important when studying education aspirations and attainment of youth, as it provides a way of exploring how individuals understand various contexts that influence their development and life outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Ecological studies have encouraged that developmental research is carried out in a life course framework. Life course theory (Elder, 1998) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) both outline how changing worlds alter people and how people choose and construct their worlds. In the life course theory framework, the investigation begins with the sociocultural environment, whereas, in ecological studies the initial focus is on individual characteristics and then the identification of the relevant ecological influences (Elder, 1998).

Bronfenbrenner's interrelated levels of social environment connects macro change and individual behaviour (1979). Changes in macro structures, such as, economic, and political structures (e.g. such as the changes noted above in the rural labour market), through meso community and family processes can influence the development of individuals on the micro level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crosnoe & Elder, 2015).

There are several premises of the life course paradigm which will guide my research. First, a persons' development and outcomes are affected by the social path they follow and their interaction with places and the time period they in (Elder, 1998). In other words, differences in place (or ecologies) interrelate with differences in historical times and so the life course of a person is shaped according to the conditions of society. For this reason, I will incorporate a focus on context, specifically rural and urban contexts, in my studies. The second premise recognises that people have agency and can make choices about their lives within the constraints of their environment, and that how a person understands their situation, together with their lived experiences, will influence the choices they make (Elder, 1998). For this reason, I will explore youths' aspiration formation in relation to understanding of, and access to, the changing and limited resources and opportunities in their rural towns (Elder & Conger, 2000).

The third key premise is linked lives, that is, understanding how people are embedded within ecologies in society and that personal actions have consequences on others (Elder, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Along with the last central premise being the timing of a person's life the ecological and life course models understand that macro level historical changes can change youths' experiences of growing up at the individual level (Elder, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). So, drawing on the concepts of linked lives and timing of lives I will be focusing on exploring the effects of rurality in contemporary times on youths' development of higher education aspirations within family, community, and sociocultural settings and the role of social capital in this relationship (Lerner, 1993).

Social Capital

My research draws on the work of Bourdieu (1977), who was concerned with power dynamics and the subtle ways that power maintains social orders, as well as the relationship between practice and theory to understand social and cultural spaces. Specifically, my research explores the social structures of rural and urban that work to drive the social systems,

processes, and practices of both inclusion and inclusion in higher education aspiration and attainment for youth (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992; Webb, Burke, Nichols, Robers, Stahl, Threadgold & Wilkinson, 2017; Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) identified various sources of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. In particular, I draw on Bourdieu's theory and conceptualisation of social capital to explore aspiration formation, including higher education aspirations, for youth in rural Australia.

Social capital as a theoretical construct has been influenced by three main academics, Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and more recently Putnam (1995). Both Bourdieu and Coleman developed their social capital theories to explain educational outcomes. However, Bourdieu developed a critical social capital theory to explain unequal educational outcomes, whereas the theories of Coleman and Putnam are based on a normative framework (Dika & Singh, 2002).

Although, the concept of social capital has been drawn on as an explanatory variable in educational research and is often proposed as a solution to ongoing educational and social inequalities, it has been interpreted in various ways, potentially leading to problematic operationalisation and measurement of the construct (Adam & Roncevic, 2003). Bourdieu was the first sociologist to critically examine the conceptualisation of social capital:

“Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (‘connections’) which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital.” (1986, p. 243).

Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualisation of social capital is founded on theories of social reproduction and symbolic power, focusing on the subtle ways in which power is transferred

and used to maintain the current social order. The work emphasises structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources, such as higher education, based on class, gender, and race (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) emphasised how social classes, especially the dominant ones (middle and upper classes), continue to keep their social privileges from one generation to the next and that the equality of educational opportunity and the resulting social mobility are myths. Bourdieu argued that economic capital was primary and that all types of capital could be reduced to economic capital which provided access to cultural and social capital (1986).

Bourdieu's (1986) definition of social capital focuses on how resources are linked to group membership, as the collective capital in the group supports each member:

“The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

In Bourdieu's definition social capital is something that is based on not only social networks, but importantly on the resources that a person can obtain because of having such networks. Bourdieu (1986) was interested in the benefits that result from membership in certain groups and the deliberate construction and maintenance through investment of economic and cultural resources. Bourdieu (1986) believed that social capital is used by the dominant group in society to produce or reproduce social inequality and maintain distance between social groups. Further, Bourdieu (1986) argued that social class determines the bonds, networks, membership in, and exclusion from certain groups. He also noted that although social capital can be negotiated by social actors under certain conditions, gaining social capital depends on the actor's social location or position within the field.

Additionally, Bourdieu (1986) discussed how groups tend to maintain homogeneity within the group as well as maintain distance from different groups. Thus, while membership in a group can have positive outcomes for a person and community, this will depend on the group's social positioning (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998). In other words, social capital can have less desirable or even negative consequences due to its exclusionary aspects, including exclusion of outsiders from a group, which can produce or reproduce inequality (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998).

Further, Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital that has value in one field may not have value in a different field and could even lead a person to be socially excluded (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992). From this perspective, my research, which aligns with my epistemology of critical realism, understands that "rural" and "urban" are social structures which have real effects on people. Furthermore, believing that the social structure of "urban" is the dominant group in my research, I aimed to explore differences in social capital between youth in rural and urban areas, and whether youth in rural areas may experience some forms of social capital more abundantly than their urban counterparts. However, this expectation holds true primarily for social capital that is negatively associated with higher education aspirations, drawing on Bourdieu's assertion that social classes, especially dominant classes or groups, leverage social capital to maintain privileges.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, social capital is produced as a result of social network benefits; however, the source of social capital comes from social, economic, and cultural structures that create differential power and status for people. Therefore, it is the social position of the person and group that is important, as this determines the potential benefits that can be gained from the social network, rather than the size of the network (Bourdieu, 1998; Dika & Singh, 2002). Furthermore, understanding social capital as access to institutional resources, such as higher education, is derived from Bourdieu's work. In the context of my research, this involves investigating how the social positions of youth (e.g., low

or high socioeconomic status) and the groups they belong to (urban or rural) influence their social capital, access to institutional resources, and ultimately shape their aspirations for higher education.

For Coleman (1988), social capital is important in the creation of human capital, with a specific focus on how youth gain knowledge from adults through information, obligations, and norms conveyed through social ties and resources. This conceptualisation of social capital is the most frequently drawn on in educational research (Dika & Singh, 2002). More specifically, Coleman argues that social capital is intangible and comprises trust, information, norms, and sanctions that prioritise the common good above personal interest (Coleman, 1988):

“Social capital constitutes a particular kind of resource available to an actor. Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure” (Coleman, 1988, p. 98).

Additionally, Coleman argued that social capital is always productive, and that by having social capital, a person can achieve things that otherwise would be unattainable (Coleman, 1990).

More recently, Putnam (1993), proposed that social capital is an attribute of community, a property of cities or nations. Putnam (1993), defines social capital as:

“Features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated action” (p.167).

Putnam (1993) used this understanding of social capital to argue that declining social capital was the reason for a social decline in America. Putnam (2000) suggested that communities

with higher levels of social capital will have less crime, and higher levels of health, wealth, and education. He also differentiated between two forms of social capital, bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital exists within a group or community, including the intra-family connections, while bridging social capital refers to the relationships between social groups, social classes, or other sociodemographic characteristics, including between people in different social positions in society (Putnam, 2000; Whybrow, 2018). However, Putnam (1993) overlooks the exclusionary aspects of social capital that can constrain individual's access to resources, actions and choices (Portes & Landolt, 1996). Like Coleman, Putnam treated social capital as always positive.

Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam all highlight the importance of social networks, and view group memberships and networks as a resource available to individuals, which can be converted into other resources to achieve valued outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). However, one major difference is that Bourdieu acknowledges the distinction of resources from the ability to obtain them in the social structure (Portes, 1998; Dika & Singh, 2002). In other words, Bourdieu recognises that a person's ability to obtain resources is related to the group they belong to. Therefore, a person from a lower-class background is less likely to be able to attain valued social capital in relation to higher education outcomes than a person from a higher-class background.

Thus, the main difference between Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital and that of Coleman and Putnam is that Bourdieu focuses on power and how social capital is linked to the reproduction of advantage or disadvantage (Smith & Kulynych, 2002). This conceptualisation draws attention to structural constraints and the inequality of access to institutional resources, such as higher education (Smith & Kulynych, 2002; Lareau, 2014; Dika & Singh, 2002). Additionally, while Coleman and Putnam treat social capital as a universal positive resource that can be gained by everyone, Bourdieu considered it to be

contextual because it is part of a system of social, economic, and cultural structures (Foley & Edwards, 1999; Dike & Singh, 2002).

This nuanced understanding informs my research through an investigation of the differences in amounts and types of social capital experienced by youth in rural Australia compared to their urban counterparts. It also examines the mediating association – positive, neutral, or negative – of the different forms of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. The study seeks to determine whether youth in rural Australia experience more forms of social capital that may promote higher education aspirations, or more forms of social capital that may constrain them, compared to their urban counterparts.

Neither Putnam's and Coleman's theories address issues of power, and as such, have been criticised for adopting a deficit perspective, where social capital is defined by something lacking in unsuccessful individuals, families, and communities rather than an investigative tool to examine structures and social processes (Morrow, 1999). Although, Bourdieu's theory of social capital provides a way to avoid this deficit approach, it has been used much less in research to examine power struggles and social reproduction (Webb et al., 2017).

Despite increasing levels of sociological interest in social capital and interest from policy makers, much of the resulting operationalisation of social capital in policy and practice draws on Coleman and Putnam's conceptualisations. These assume that social capital is a universal positive resource that can be accessed by anyone and increased to gain better education outcomes for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. This body of research overlooks power struggles and differential access to resources and social networks (Dika & Singh, 2002).

Consequently, there has been limited progress and understanding of why social capital interventions have not produced the expected results for youth who are traditionally

underrepresented in higher education, including youth living in rural Australia (Webb et al., 2017).

In my research, I consider how the construction and maintenance of economic and cultural capital within groups, as theorised by Bourdieu, shape higher education aspirations for youth. For instance, I explore the exclusionary aspects of social capital, including the tendency of dominant groups, such as urban and high socioeconomic, to maintain homogeneity, distance themselves from other groups, such as rural and low socioeconomic, and reproduce their advantage. In other words, I aimed to make visible how social capital is a strategy based on networks of inclusion and exclusion.

Additionally, Bourdieu (1986) challenged the idea of meritocracy in education systems and believed an educational qualification is a form of cultural capital. Using Bourdieu's understandings, sociologists have argued that educational outcomes often measure social privilege rather than talent, ability, or intrinsic potential (Webb et al., 2017; Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, the educational outcomes of a student, such as attaining a university degree (higher education), are viewed by society and educational institutions as having been achieved on merit alone (Bourdieu, 1977). However, if structural constraints—such as geographic location (living in a rural area), and low socioeconomic status—that lessen students' chances of achieving higher education are not acknowledged, it might be inferred that the lower educational outcomes of the students are because they are less able rather than being seen as a result of structural disadvantages (Webb et al., 2017; Bourdieu, 1977). In other words, in the context of my research on higher education aspirations, this approach oversimplifies of the issue by attributing a failure to aspire to the individual, rather than to the underlying structural conditions which limit their choice to aspire to higher education (Campbell & Mckendrick, 2017; Burke et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2017).

Additionally, while all students bring capital to educational institutions, their capital is only effective if it aligns with the capital that is valued within those institutions (Wacquant &

Bourdieu, 1993). Hence, status and hierarchy in education, that is, access and attainment of higher education for certain groups, can be maintained through what Bourdieu terms “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu et al., 1992). Symbolic violence, refers to dominant groups, treating an individual or group in an inferior way, denying them resources, and limiting a person’s aspirations and social mobility (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992). Further, the dominated person experiencing symbolic violence sees their situation as normal as the symbolic violence is hidden in the dominant assumptions, norms, and values of society (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992).

In the context of my research, this means exploring structural inequalities experienced by youth in rural areas in relation to access to education and higher education, such as resourcing of schools, distance to higher education institutions, resources such as the internet, and employment opportunities, as well as consideration of values, norms and capital. Specifically, exploring whether youth in rural areas perceive they have the same number of choices as their urban counterparts to choose to aspire to higher education.

In summary, aspirations for and access to higher education are impacted by youths’ capital. For this reason, I incorporate functions of capital into my research. In particular, I focus on social capital as a lens to uncover the social structures and processes that can be exclusionary to one group and maintain privileges for another social group, specifically in relation to higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

Specifically, my research examines six forms of social capital to maintain a balanced perspective that avoids privileging any single form. This strategy enables me to examine the complex ways in which varying social networks and relationships can shape higher education aspirations. By employing a mixed-method approach, I combine quantitative analysis to identify overarching patterns of inequity, with qualitative research to uncover the nuanced interplay between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations.

Intersectionality

As previously mentioned, critical realism lends itself to the subtle analysis of social processes and dynamics of power. My research draws on tools from a feminist poststructuralist methodology to assist with this analysis, and my research design was informed by a feminist, poststructuralist methodological approach to intersectionality (Derrida & Moore, 1974; Foucault, 1979; McCall, 2005). Intersectionality has assisted me address the complexity involved in researching youths' higher education aspirations, which are concerned with multiple dimensions of their social life (lived experiences, identities, and social locations) (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005). Intersectionality also recognises that by deconstructing categories, such as "rural youth," inequity itself can begin to be deconstructed (McCall, 2005). Through the deconstruction of categories such as rural, class, and race, normative assumptions can be examined and altered, which can assist with positive social change (McCall, 2005).

I used an intersectional approach in an attempt to gain more complex and inclusive understandings of power relations and knowledge, with the aim of contributing to changing social practices to be equitable (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). Initially, I used categories such as rural, urban, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender, as they were an important focus in this research. I aimed to explore differences and complexities of experience at different points of intersection to further my understandings of the diversity and differences within the groups (Crenshaw, 2013). This approach brings attention to the material and discursive processes through which categories are produced and experienced in daily life.

In my qualitative research, intersectionality assisted in describing various types of lived experiences, opportunities, and constraints that youth in rural areas experience. The analysis of intersectionality in my quantitative research allowed me to examine the role of background variables related to social capital and different forms of social and personal identity on youth's higher education aspirations (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005).

Summary of Theoretical Framework

In summary, the applied developmental science framework will assist me to understand the link between youth in rural areas and the developmental context of their aspirations for higher education (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bourdieu's theory of social capital will assist me in uncovering the power relations in social structures and processes that maintain inequity in choice to aspire to and attain higher education (Bourdieu, 1990). Additionally, intersectionality will build on these to further explore social practices and highlight complexities in social positioning (geographic location, low or high socioeconomic backgrounds, gender, ethnicity) to further my understanding (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005).

Methodological Approach

Consideration of methodological approaches is important as they influence how researchers conceptualise questions or problems, gather and analyse data, and ultimately construct and represent knowledge (Walter & Andersen, 2013). In my studies, I employed a critical methodological approach informed by critical realism. With this approach, I understand that the researcher is never neutral, that all research is embedded in complex power relations and that the social world is contextualised and embodied (Walter & Andersen, 2013). Throughout my project, I tried to be reflexive, using this as a framework to guide me in becoming more aware of power dynamics embedded in the research process. I aimed to remain mindful that my interpretations, perceptions, and ways of knowing would shape my research questions, which would then shape the knowledge and discourses produced.

As previously discussed, it is often social privilege that is measured in education rather than intrinsic potential, talent, and ability (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, in my thesis, I drew on feminist, post structural theories and perspectives informed by a critical realism epistemology, which constructs knowledge as understanding the interaction between people

constructing their own world and the structures that have real effects on them, such as urban and rural structures (Sayer, 2000; Bhaksar, 1978).

CHAPTER 2: QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Quantitative Studies

In my two quantitative studies presented in the following chapters I use an archival, contemporary, large-scale dataset: The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth 2003 (LSAY 2003). The first quantitative study (Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital) uses the LSAY 2003 dataset to empirically investigate differences in amount and types of social capital for youth living in rural and urban areas and the second quantitative study (Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis) uses the LSAY 2003 dataset to empirically investigate the relationship between geography (rural and urban) and higher education aspirations, and the mediation association of social capital in this relationship.

Rationale for Selecting Archival Data in Quantitative Analysis

Archival and secondary data is an important and valuable resource in social research (Elder, Pavalko & Clipp, 1993). By using existing data researchers can access information that might otherwise be too time consuming and expensive to gather, additionally the use of existing data in quality archival datasets ensures against duplication of research efforts. As such, archival data was my preferred choice as it allowed me to gain access to large amounts of available reliable data that would not have been possible for me to collect within the confines of this PhD research. The constraints of time and resources meant that I would not have been able to collect historical data or data on a comparable extensive number of participants. Additionally, I was constrained in data collection due to the COVID 19 pandemic (see Appendix C: Re-design of Thesis in Response to the Impacts of the COVID 19 Pandemic). These constraints reinforced my decision to rely on existing data, enabling my research questions to be answered with high quality data.

Archival Large-Scale Dataset: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth 2003 (LSAY 2003)

Elder, Pavalko and Clipp (2011) emphasise the importance of aligning archival data with the research questions. For my research questions, I chose the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth 2003 dataset (LSAY 2003) as it provides large, and nationally representative data on Australian youth, including geographic location, social capital, and higher education aspirations. The LSAY 2003 surveys over 10,000 Australian youth. Furthermore, the dataset provides exceptional coverage of a wide range of geographic locations, including provincial, remote, and urban, in Australia allowing for comparisons between places simply not possible in a bespoke research program.

The LSAY 2003 is an extension of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment Survey (PISA). The LSAY 2003 dataset collects information about education, work, finances, health, and social activities. It includes a wide range of information on school and post-school topics including social background demographics; student aspirations and achievement; attitudes to school; vocational and tertiary education; employment and job seeking; and life satisfaction. Additionally, the LSAY 2003 dataset provides many variables that directly relate to social capital constructs, allowing for a strong alignment between the data and my research questions. Furthermore, it contains several background variables that facilitate control for background effects.

One disadvantage of LSAY is that it's first wave of data was in 2003; with a final wave of data collected in 2013. In the 20 years since the initial wave of data, there have been significant advancements in communication technologies, which have undoubtedly influenced how people interact and access information. However, despite these changes the enduring mechanisms of social capital and the foundational social processes that cultivate social connections within rural communities persist and remain evident. The fundamental elements

of social capital are deeply rooted in human behaviour, and so the effects I observed in the studies are likely true for contemporary youth in rural Australia making the LSAY 2003 dataset valuable in the exploration of social capital, youth, and higher education aspirations.

Social Capital Measures in LSAY 2003

The LSAY 2003 survey include 26 proxies (data items) for social capital (see Table 2.1 *Social Capital Related Questions LSAY 2003 Cohort*). These items were developed into a social capital measures by Semo and Karmel (2011) in response to the frequent use of social capital by government and policy makers to explain and attempt to mediate educational outcome disparities despite their being very little empirical evidence of its importance in an Australian context, underscoring the need for empirical research. Specifically, the study by Semo and Karmel (2011) sought to establish whether higher levels of social capital increase the likelihood of educational participation, even when considering background characteristics such as Indigenous status, parental education, and school sector. To date social capital from LSAY has not been used to explore research questions relating to geography and higher education aspirations.

To develop a social capital measure for LSAY 2003, Semo and Karmel (2011) conducted a literature review to develop a social capital theory drawing on Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993). They found that although the concept of social capital is extensive, certain themes emerged with clear connections to certain social capital constructs.

These themes encompassed the role of strong communities and ties among parents, educators, and students in fostering learning and influencing learning outcomes, as well as the impact of the strength of community networks in improving retention rates and attainment levels to mitigate disadvantage. Further, the significance of school networks was identified as important in improving educational outcomes, with a particular emphasis on the positive correlation between students' attitudes towards their schools and their educational engagement, largely influenced by teachers. Social and leisure activities which build

networks, including participation in extracurricular activities and volunteering were also identified as a theme having positive educational outcomes. Additionally, while the positive influence of informal networks, such as friends and relatives, was recognised, a contrasting theme emerged in disadvantaged communities. Here, ties to family and community were found to potentially impede youths' ability to progress beyond their current circumstances (Holland, 2009)

Semo and Karmel (2011) argued that social capital is a multi-dimensional concept which required a variety of measures to capture different elements of social capital. Drawing on the Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS) conceptual framework and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) framework (Stone & Hughes, 2002; Edwards, 2004), they selected data items from the LSAY 2003 survey that aligned with the social capital constructs identified in their literature review. The theory underlying their measurement grouped social capital domains into bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

Bonding social capital refers to the relationships within a close-knit homogenous group, such as family or close friends, fostering strong personal connections and support. Bridging social capital extends beyond close circles to include more distant relationships, like acquaintances or colleagues from different backgrounds, potentially facilitating broader access to information and resources. Linking social capital, on the other hand, connects individuals or groups with people in positions of power or authority, potentially enabling access to resources or influence across different social strata.

After grouping the social capital domains into bonding, bridging and linking social capital Semo and Karmel (2011) identified specific items within LSAYs data they believed would map onto these domains. In the context of the LSAY data, bonding social capital was assessed through questions related to students' feelings of belonging and safety at school, their relationships with peers, and their interactions with teachers. These elements are indicative of the supportive and trustful relationships that characterise bonding social capital. Bridging

social capital was measured through students' participation in various school-organised activities, such as sports, music, debating, and drama. Participation in these activities reflects the ability to connect with a broader range of individuals and groups. Linking social capital was not explicitly defined in the LSAY study but can be inferred from the broader context of students' engagement with school and community activities, as well as the influence of formal networks like career advisors. The structure was as follows:

Bonding Social Capital

Student connectedness to school examines the bond between students and their school by levels of belonging and feelings of safety (data items 1-7).

Student – teacher relationship examines the quality of the relationship between students and their teachers by levels of how well students get on with their teachers, the help they get from teachers, and how fairly students feel they are treated (data items 8 – 12).

Bridging Social Capital

Participation in school-based activities examines the bridges made due to students' involvement in additional school-based activities, such as music, sport, debating, and drama and looks at the size of students' networks and the frequency that they participate in additional activities (data items 13 – 17).

Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Influence of Informal Networks (Peer Influence) examines the level of influence from students' networks when they are thinking about their future and the levels of trust and density in their networks. Students with dense networks are more likely to be influenced and cooperate more (data items 21 – 25).

Community support examines the strength of students' bonds to their peers, as well as to broader networks through activities such as peer support and mediation, and volunteering, and also examines trust and reciprocity (data items 18 – 20).

Linking Social Capital

Influence of institutional networks examines the influence of media on a student when they are thinking about their future (data item 26).

Semo and Karmel (2011) then used exploratory factor analysis to test this measurement theory. They determined the number of factors within the twenty-six social capital items by two criteria: the “latent root criterion” and the “percentage of variance criterion.” From their analysis they obtained five discrete factors: student-teacher relationship; student connectedness with school; participation in school-based activities; participation in sport; and the influence of peer networks when thinking about the future (peer influence). The factors derived were a close fit to the theory. However, empirical evidence suggested an additional factor that was also consistent with some literature: participation in volunteering. The final measurement structure was as follows (see Table 2.1 *Social Capital Related Questions LSAY 2003 Cohort*).

Table 2.1*Social Capital Related Questions LSAY 2003 Cohort*

Data item	Social capital-related questions	Network type	A-priori Structure	Empirical Structure
	School	Bonding	X	X
	My school is a place where:			
1	▪ I feel like an outsider (or left out of things)			
2	▪ I make friends easily			
3	▪ I feel like I belong			
4	▪ I feel awkward and out of place			
5	▪ Other students seem to like me			
6	▪ I feel lonely			
7	Your school is a place where you feel safe and secure			
	Teachers	Bonding	X	X
	Thinking about the teachers at your school: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?			
8	▪ Students get along well with most teachers			
9	▪ Most teachers are interested in students' wellbeing			
10	▪ Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say			
11	▪ If I need extra help, I will receive it from y teachers			
12	▪ Most of my teachers treat me fairly			
	Activities	Bridging	X	X
	During 2003, how often did you take part in the following school-organised activities:			
13	▪ Sport			
14	▪ Music, band or orchestra			
15	▪ Debating			
16	▪ Drama, theatre, dance or a school play			
	On average, how many hours do you spend each week:			
17	▪ playing sports			
	Community support	Bonding and bridging		X
	During 2003, how often did you take part in the following school-organised activities:			
18	▪ School support such as peer mediation, peer support or student representative council			
19	▪ Volunteer activities in the wider community which were organised by the school			
20	On average, how many hours do you spend each week:			
	▪ Doing unpaid/voluntary work			
	Influences of informal networks	Bonding and bridging	X	X
21	▪ In thinking about your future, how much does your family influence your thinking?			
22	▪ How about your friends, in thinking about your future, how much do they influence your thinking?			
23	▪ Your schoolteachers, do they influence your thinking about what you'd like to do in the future?			
24	▪ How about the career advisor or counsellor at school, do they influence your thing?			
25	▪ Finally, your own involvement in jobs or work experience at school? Does this influence your thinking?			
	Influences of institutional networks	Linking	Qualities (trust) Structure (density)	
26	▪ And when you think about your future, how much does the media influence you?		X	X

Current Quantitative Studies Methodology

Using the rich data provided by the LSAY 2003 dataset, my first quantitative study (Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital) empirically investigates differences in amount and types of social capital for youth living in rural and urban areas and the second quantitative study (Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis) empirically investigates the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, and the mediation association of social capital in this relationship.

Operationalisation and Measurement of Social Capital

The social capital measures used in the empirical measurement of both quantitative studies were examined in relation to Bourdieu's concept of social capital (as outlined in Chapter 1). The aim of this approach was to link theory and empirical measurement thereby improving the usefulness of social capital as a concept in policy making in education (Gannon & Roberts, 2020).

From a Bourdieusian perspective I investigated the LSAY social capital measures through the lens of membership in different groups. Both studies explored the social capital measures in relation to the social positioning of the group (rural or urban), and the social structures, processes, and practices that can be exclusionary to one group and maintain privileges for another social group, specifically in relation to higher education aspiration formation. Additionally, the LSAY 2003 dataset provided a collection of different background demographics to interrogate an intersectional approach informed by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts. This approach provided further nuanced understandings on how social capital operates for youth in different social positions across different geographic locations. The next sections will outline the participants, measures, and variables used in the research.

Participants

One cohort of the LSAY database was used: LSAY 2003. This cohort is a representative sample (N=10,370) of 15-year-olds living in Australia (PISA 2003). Basic descriptive statistics are shown in Appendix B Tables 2.2 – 2.6. The cohort used a two-stage sampling procedure, with the primary unit being schools selected proportional to size, then a random sample of students from that school (nesting technique). The sample cohort is a subset of the population that we can use to learn more about the population. However, many things can affect how a sample reflects the population, and therefore how valid and reliable the conclusions will be. Further, attrition is present as is typical with a large-scale longitudinal survey and especially one's that include transition phases.

Due to the selection of individuals with unequal probability and non-response it is necessary to apply a weight to each individual to rebalance the data. Individuals who represent under-represented groups, such as Indigenous students, are allocated larger weights, and those who represent over-represented groups are allocated smaller weights. These weights aim to overcome the effects of non-response over time from different groups so that the sample more closely aligns with the original population (Semo & Karmel, 2011). Missing data in this study was small (typically less than 5%) and as such missing data was handled with the combined sample and attrition weights.

This study employed the balanced repeated replication weights to account for attrition and the multi-stage sample design (taking into account that the school attended can be a confounding variable as the school a child attends will have some influence on the child) to provide more accurate estimates of the statistics and more reliable conclusions (Lumley, 2010). This is the survey organisers recommended approach over multi-level modelling where the data models can incorporate these weights (Rothman, 2007).

Social Capital Measures

Six social capital measures were used: student connectedness with school; student – teacher relations; influence of peer networks when thinking about the future (Peer Influence); participation in school-based activities; participation in sports; participation in volunteering activities. See above for details.

Several variables were included in the analysis in addition to social capital including: geographic location (urban, provincial, or remote), gender, Indigenous status, Country of birth (migrant status), and socioeconomic status from the PISA database. The associations between the different types of social capital measures for youth across the various intersections of geographic location, Indigenous status, country of birth, and socioeconomic status were explored.

Socioeconomic Status

The PISA index of economic, social, and cultural capital (ESCS) (OECD 2004) was used to measure socioeconomic status. Traditionally, a student’s socioeconomic status has comprised parental educational attainment, parental occupational status, and household or family income. (“Improving the Measurement of Socioeconomic Status: A Theoretical Foundation”) There is substantial agreement that the three main indicators of socioeconomic status are parental income, parental education, and parental occupation (Willms & Tramonte, 2019).

The PISA measure of socioeconomic status (ESCS) is a composite of a weighted average of three components: parental educational attainment (in years), parental occupational status on the “International Socioeconomic Index” (ISEI) scale (Ganzeboom 2010; Ganzeboom, De Graaf, & Treiman, 1992), and a measure of “household possessions” (Avvisati, 2020). Two of the three components that inform the composite score of ESCS, parental years of education and parental occupational status are the same as those used

traditionally (Avvisati, 2020). The third component is an index of household possessions which correlates to a measure of the household's income (Friedman, 1957; Avvisati, 2020).

In essence, the ESCS is designed to measure the concrete socioeconomic dimensions that influence a student's access to educational resources and opportunities separate from the concept of social capital, as it does not address the social networks, interpersonal relationships, and community resources intrinsic to social capital.

Higher Education aspirations

One variable was derived relating to expectations of a university education (higher education aspirations). Participants were asked at age 15: What do you plan to do in the year after you leave school - for example, get an apprenticeship or traineeship, go to TAFE or university, get a job, or what?

School Geographic Location

Categories of the MCEETYA Schools Geographic Location Classification (MSGLC) are used in the report (see Appendix B Table 2.7 Categories of the MCEETYA Schools Geographic Location Classification)

Country of Birth (migrant) Status

Categories includes Native: youth born in Australia to Australian born parents; First Generation: youth born in Australia to non-Australian born parents; Non-Native: youth born overseas to non-Australian born parents.

Gender

Self-reported gender identity was used. The term "gender" rather than "sex" was chosen as it is more inclusive, respects self-identification, and recognises the diverse and socially constructed nature of gender. The use of the term gender is a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach that aligns with the evolving understanding of gender identity in contemporary society.

Academic Achievement

I decided not to control for academic achievement as I am drawing on a Bourdieusian perspective of social capital which is concerned with the dynamics of power in society and reproduction of educational and social inequalities. Academic achievement, from a Bourdieusian perspective, is an outcome of family socioeconomic background (social class) and an education system which reproduces inequalities in educational outcomes therefore if we controlled for academic outcomes, we would be controlling for the mechanism by which rural status gives rise to social capital; thus, giving a biased estimate of the influence of place on social capital.

Effect Size

In the context of my quantitative studies for practical interpretation, a z score around 0.1 is considered as representing a “small” effect size, a value around 0.2 is considered a practical “medium” effect size and a value of approximately 0.4 is considered a practical “moderate to large” effect size. These effect sizes together with my theoretical approach guide the evaluation of the practical significance of the observed effects within this study. Statistical models used to test research questions are covered in each of the quantitative empirical chapters.

In this chapter, I have detailed the quantitative methodology that is foundational to my research. The next chapter, Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths’ Social Capital, is the first of two empirical quantitative studies central to this thesis. This chapter, along with my second study in Chapter 4, will demonstrate the practical application of both my theoretical framework and quantitative methodology outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3: DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS OF GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL GROUP BACKGROUNDS ON YOUTHS' SOCIAL CAPITAL.

Introduction

Recently, the concept of social capital has gained attention from educational researchers and policymakers as a potential strategy to address the ongoing disparities in higher education outcomes between youth in rural and urban Australia. This interest stems partly from studies indicating that youth with higher levels of social capital are more likely to overcome disadvantages, such as low socioeconomic status, and achieve better educational outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002; Israel, Beaulieu & Hartless, 2001; Menés & Donato, 2015; Dufur, Parcel & Troutman, 2013; Semo & Karmel, 2011; Coleman, 1988). As such, there is a small but growing body of literature suggesting that rural-urban education outcome disparities can be partly explained by differences in social capital (Byun, Meece, Irvin & Hutchins, 2012; Lannoo, Verhaeghe, Vandeputte & Devos, 2012).

However, with most research on social capital focusing on the general youth population and youth in urban areas, less is known about social capital in the rural context. Further, there is less nuanced evidence exploring how geography at different locations of the intersection of socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth, and gender might contribute to differences in social capital between youth in rural and urban Australia.

This quantitative intersectional study used a large-scale dataset (Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth 2003) to examine the effects of geography intersected with social group attributes (socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth, and gender) within a life course framework on social capital to explore how youth in rural and urban Australia experience social capital. Specifically, this study aimed to quantify the amounts and types of social capital experienced by youth in different geographic locations. The use of a quantitative

methodology was crucial in providing generalised findings at the macro level for these populations.

Background

There are important differences in the geographies and demographics between rural and urban communities, all of which may contribute to differences in social capital experienced by youth. In the rural context, social capital may be of particular interest due to the distinct social structures of rural communities. These social structures are often caused by smaller size and geographic isolation, which foster close-knit networks and potentially increase social capital (Beggs, Haines, & Hurlbert, 1996; Allcott, Karlan, Mobius, Rosenblatt & Szeidl, 2007).

The literature offers varied perspectives on differences in social capital for youth in rural and urban areas. One view suggests that rural areas possess more social capital than urban areas. Rural areas are often believed to have a high degree of social cohesion and social involvement whereas urban areas are thought to have communities with weaker family and friendship bonds with less participation in community activities. This viewpoint suggests that youth in rural areas develop unique forms of social capital due to the close-knit community which may provide a “rural advantage” for youth in relation to educational outcomes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

Further, this perspective suggests that the small size of schools within small communities facilitates the building of networks with teachers, peers, and the community, resulting in more social capital, particularly in relation to school-related social capital. Additionally, some research indicates that smaller schools, common in many rural areas, tend to have higher levels of social capital, as these environments foster feelings of connectedness and encourage aspirations to post school education pathways (Dee, Ha & Jacob, 2007; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Nelson, 2016; Byun et al., 2012; Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009).

More specifically, it is suggested that youth in rural areas may develop more bonding social capital such as family, community, and peer relationships, than youth in urban areas (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Cuervo et al., 2019, 2016; Sorensen, 2016). This is often attributed to the higher levels of social cohesion and more frequent social interactions with peers, family, and community networks common in rural communities, as opposed to urban settings (Beggs et al., 1996; Allcott et al., 2007).

In contrast, a significant growing body of literature suggests that youth in rural areas generally have less social capital overall than their urban counterparts, contributing to disparities in educational outcomes. For example, some studies indicate that youth in rural areas have less of the types of social capital gained from participation in extracurricular and other activities, such as sports, due to a lack of availability of these activities compared to youth in urban areas (Cuervo et al., 2019).

Further, while youth in rural areas might have strong bonding social capital, they may lack the bridging social capital that urban areas often provide, due to smaller population sizes and fewer opportunities for diverse connections. Some studies indicate that youth in urban areas have higher levels of social capital due to the density and diversity of population in urban areas, which facilitates more frequent and varied social interactions (Lannoo et al., 2010; Sorensen, 2016). This is further supported by the network effects common in urban areas, where thin, frequent interactions have been shown to enhance social capital through peer networks (Andersson, Larsson & Wernberg, 2016). Additionally, the generally higher socioeconomic status of urban areas may indirectly increase social capital for youth in urban areas through better infrastructure and services (Andersson et al., 2016).

As such, some studies indicate that youth in urban areas will have more social capital than their rural counterparts overall, with an expectation of more bridging social capital due to having a bigger and more diversified pool of social relations to draw on (Lannoo et al., 2012; Major, Wilkinson, Langat & Santoro, 2013; Sorensen, 2016). This then raised a key question:

Do youth from rural and urban areas have different amounts of social capital? This question gains significance especially when we consider the different forms of social capital.

Moreover, correlations have been found between different social background factors and higher education outcomes, including positive correlations for youth from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Bradley et al., 2008; Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim, 2016; Mills & Gale, 2010). As such, it becomes important to also consider the role of social background factors in the relationship between geography and social capital. This consideration raises a key question: Do youth from different social backgrounds in rural Australia have different amounts of social capital? This question gains significance especially when we consider that many rural areas are also low socioeconomic areas.

As we know that youth in urban areas have better outcomes in higher education, and if social capital is positively linked to educational outcomes, then I hypothesised that youth in urban areas would have more social capital which can be converted into higher education aspirations and outcomes.

Current Study, Gaps and Limitations

Despite increasing levels of sociological interest in the effects of social capital on youth in terms of educational outcomes, and the development and implementation of social capital interventions, many gaps and limitations remain. Much of the research is from the USA, with less known about the Australian context. Further, most studies on social capital have primarily focused on either the general population or youth in urban areas from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with significantly less research exploring social capital and youth in rural Australia (Dika & Singh, 2002; Israel, Beulieu & Hartless, 2001; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Byun et al., 2012; Reeves & Deng, 2022).

This is significant to note given the evidence that suggests important differences in the demographics between rural and urban communities. However, this is unsurprising

considering that youth in rural Australia remain a group that is understudied in general (Burke et al., 2023).

Further, while there is a small but growing body of literature exploring social capital and the Australian rural context, many of these studies are qualitative and focus on specific rural areas. Fewer are quantitative, and fewer still use large-scale quantitative methods to provide macro level generalisable findings (Cuervo et al., 2019; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). While these previous studies contribute important and valuable insights to the literature on social capital for youth in rural Australia, their generalisability is constrained by the considerable diversity among rural communities, as I will detail in my systematic review in Chapter 5: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review.

Further, there is less nuanced evidence exploring how variations in the experience of geography (rural or urban) at different locations of the intersection of socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth, gender, and family background might contribute to differences in social capital experienced by youth. Additionally, when considering social capital as coming in different forms, it is also not clear whether youth in rural areas would be lower in all forms of social capital.

As an attempt to fill these gaps, my first quantitative study, presented in this chapter, takes the form of a quantitative intersectional study using a large-scale dataset (Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth 2003). This study examines the differential effects of geography, intersected with social group attributes, on social capital for youth in rural and urban locations. Specifically, this study aims to quantify the amount and type of social capital youth in different geographic locations have. By drawing on a large-scale national dataset this study attempted to better address differences in social capital experienced by youth in rural and urban Australia.

Additionally, much of the research has drawn on a normative conceptualisation of social capital without examining its complexities, particularly in the context of explaining educational outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). There has been a tendency to view social capital as a universally accessible resource that always produces positive outcomes, as such, fewer studies have used a social capital theory framework (Dika & Singh, 2002; Adam & Roncevic, 2003). To help address these concerns, I draw on Bourdieu's theory and conceptualisation of social capital as outlined in Chapter 1.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu (1977) explored the relationship between practice and theory to understand social and cultural spaces, asserting that “theory without empirical research is empty, empirical research without theory is blind” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 744 – 745). This study, which drew from the Bourdieusian theory of social capital, as outlined in Chapter 1, aimed to make visible how social capital is a strategy based on networks of inclusion and exclusion. It also extended this framework by incorporating intersectionality alongside to guide this research.

There is important seminal literature on educational aspirations for youth living in rural areas on which many subsequent studies have been built and contributed important findings to this area of research. For example, Conger & Elder's seven-year study of farmers during the “farm crisis” in the rural Midwest in the 1980s was one of the first large-scale critical rural studies conducted (1994). This study and several subsequent studies, including “Youth of the Land” were important in focusing on rural contexts drawing on ecological systems and life course theory (Elder & Conger, 2000).

In the current study, I drew on an ecological systems theory, which pays attention to the multiple contextual influences on human development and behaviour. This approach considers individual characteristics, as well as the roles of family, school, and community

settings. It highlights the interrelationships among these contexts and the need to pay attention to how they affect youths' daily lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1998).

This approach underscores that not all social capital will result in positive impacts on educational outcomes. Therefore, the current study examined a broad range of bonding and bridging social capital measures. These included school connectedness, student-teacher relationships, school-based activities, sports participation, peer influence, and volunteering social capital. The study aimed to explore the amount of social capital for each measure, as well as the sum total.

In this study, I understand bonding social capital as the connections within a group or community, including the intra-family relationships, while bridging social capital refers to the relationships between social groups, social classes, or other sociodemographic characteristics, including between people in different social positions in society (Putnam, 2000; Whybrow, 2018).

This approach aligns with my epistemology of critical realism, as it recognises that people have agency and can make choices about their lives within the constraints of their environment (structures). Hence, it is important to explore youths' access to resources such as social capital and experience of it in their rural towns (Bourdieu, 1984; Elder & Conger, 2000). In the current study I understood that "rural" and "urban" are social structures which have real effects on people. However, they are mediated by social action and interactions (Houston, 2010). I used the social category of "rural" as the foundation to understand the more complex layered heterogeneity of the social world. In other words, geography and the structure of "rural," is a social and cultural location not just physical.

Additionally, in the current study, I incorporated intersectionality into my research design and analysis. This approach allowed me to examine the role of background variables and different forms of social and personal identity on youth's educational aspirations, as well as cumulative disadvantage across different intersections (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; McCall,

2005). To do this I looked at the interactions between socioeconomic status, gender, country of birth, Indigenous status, and geographic location.

I hoped that by drawing on Bourdieu's theory and conceptualisation of social capital, along with an intersectional lens, it would enable a more nuanced understanding of social capital for youth living in rural areas (Grenfell & James, 2004; Dika & Singh, 2002).

Research Hypothesis

I hypothesised that variations in the experience of geography (rural or urban) at different locations of the intersection of socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth, and gender contribute to the amount and type of social capital youth have.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Research Question 1: Do youth living in rural and urban locations differ in the amount of social capital?

I hypothesised that youth living in urban areas would have more social capital as they have better higher educational outcomes.

Hypothesis 1: Youth living in urban areas are more connected to their schools than youth living in rural areas.

Hypothesis 1.1: Youth living in urban areas have better quality student – teacher relations than youth living in rural areas.

Hypothesis 1.2: Youth living in urban areas have higher levels of peer influence when thinking about the future than youth living in rural areas.

Hypothesis 1.3: Youth living in urban areas participate more in school-based activities than youth living in rural areas.

Hypothesis 1.4: Youth living in urban areas participate more in sports than youth living in rural areas.

Hypothesis 1.5: Youth living in urban areas participate more volunteering than youth living in

rural areas.

Research Question 1b: Do youth living in rural and urban locations differ in the amount of social capital when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status?

Hypothesis 1b.1: Youth living in urban areas have better quality student – teacher relations even when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

Hypothesis 1b.2: Youth living in urban areas are more connected to their schools even when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

Hypothesis 1b.3: Youth living in urban areas are more influenced by their peers when thinking about their futures even when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

Hypothesis 1b.4: Youth living in urban areas participate more in school-based activities even when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

Hypothesis 1b.5: Youth living in urban areas participate more in sports even when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

Hypothesis 1b.6: Youth living in urban areas volunteer more even when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

Research Question 2: Does social background (socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, geographic location, country of birth, and gender) interact with place to affect the amount of social capital youth living in rural areas obtain?

Hypothesis 2: Boys in rural and urban areas are more likely to have lower amounts of social capital than girls.

Hypothesis 2.1: Youth from high socioeconomic status backgrounds in rural and urban areas are more likely to have higher amounts of social capital than youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Hypothesis 2.2: Non-Indigenous youth in rural and urban areas are more likely to have higher amounts social capital than Indigenous youth.

Hypothesis 2.3: Youth born in Australia in rural and urban areas are more likely to have higher amounts of social capital than youth born overseas.

Methodology

As previously discussed in the Quantitative Methodology and Background Chapter I am using The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth 2003 (LSAY 2003), an extension of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment Survey (PISA) as it provided the best fit possible to the research questions due to its inclusion of specifically constructed social capital measures initially designed and developed for the LSAY 2003 cohort (Semo & Karmel, 2006). My use of archival data was my preferred choice as it allowed me to gain access to large amounts of available reliable data, as opposed to collecting new data which would be time-consuming and susceptible to measurement errors.

Analysis and Modelling

Regression analyses were used to explore all the models. The basic model (M1) explored the relationship between social capital and geographic location.

$$SC_i = \alpha + \beta_1(j)$$

Where, SC_i is the i th social capital variable and β_1 is the estimate of the j th category of geographic location (urban is the reference category with provincial and remote the other categories).

A second set of models (M2) were similar but included the following covariates: socioeconomic status, sex, country of birth, and Indigenous status.

$$SC_i = \alpha + \beta_1(j) + \beta_{SES} + \beta_{girl} + \beta_{migrant} + \beta_{Indigenous}$$

A third set of models (M3) included the interaction between geographic location and each of these covariates (here gender is used as an example). Here, I estimated one interaction at a time. With gender as an example:

$$SC_i = \alpha + \beta_1(j) + \beta_{SES} + \beta_{girl} + \beta_{migrant} + \beta_{Indigenous} + \beta_{girl \times location(j)}$$

Regression model with weights to account for survey design, attrition, and the nested nature of the data, was used to examine the relationship between geographic location and the amount of social capital youth obtain. It is important to note that the weights used here provide a means for accounting for the complex survey design including the nesting of students within schools (Lumley, 2010). For more complex models, multilevel models might be preferable. In this case however, I chose to use the methodology of accounting for nesting along with other complex survey design artefacts via the use of weights developed by the survey organisers for this purpose.

The analysis was conducted with each of the six individual social capital measures (student – teacher relations; peer influence; participation in school-based activities; participation in sports; participation in volunteering activities) which are related to the development of higher educational aspirations and outcomes.

Results

Youth Living in Rural and Urban Areas Differ in Amounts of Social Capital

Table 3.2 shows there were statistically significant differences in amounts of social capital between youth in rural and urban areas. The effect sizes are in a z-score metric. Youth in provincial and remote areas were found to be practically and statistically significantly less connected with their school; particularly for youth in remote locations (see Figure 3.1). Rural youth in remote locations also had less positive student-teacher relationships than students in urban areas; though there was no difference for rural youth in provincial locations (see Figure 3.2).

Interestingly, rural youth were not consistently lower in social capital than their urban peers. Youth in provincial and remote areas were found to have practical and statistically significant higher levels of social capital in peer influence (see Figure 3.3), and volunteering (see Figure 3.4), and have similar levels of participation in sport (see Figure 3.5) and participation in school activities social capital (see Figure 3.6). Youth in rural areas had practically and statistically significantly higher volunteering social capital. Overall, we can see that youth living in urban areas had higher levels of social capital in only two of the social capital measures out of the six, school connectedness and teacher-student relationships. Therefore, we can see that youth in rural areas had a statistically significant higher amount of social capital overall.

Table 3.2*Location Differences in Social Capital*

Location	Social Capital					
	<i>School</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Peer</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Sport</i>	<i>Volunteer</i>
Urban (Comparison Category)	0.03 [-0.01, 0.06]	0.03 [-0.01, 0.06]	-0.05 [-0.10, -0.00]*	0.02 [-0.20, 0.06]	-0.01 [-0.05, 0.03]	-0.06 [-0.10, -0.03]***
Provincial difference from Urban	-0.09 [-0.18, -0.01]*	-0.05 [-0.12, -0.01]	0.13 [0.07, 0.20] ***	0.05 [-0.14, 0.05]	0.03 [-0.07, 0.13]	0.21 [0.11, 0.31] ***
Remote difference from Urban	-0.30 [-0.52, -0.07] *	-0.17 [-0.32, -0.01]*	0.30 [0.10, 0.50] **	0.01 [-0.14, 0.15]	-0.03 [-0.25, 0.18]	0.40 [0.12, 0.58]***

Note: z-scores

**** p< 001; *** p=.01; ** p=.05; 95% CI

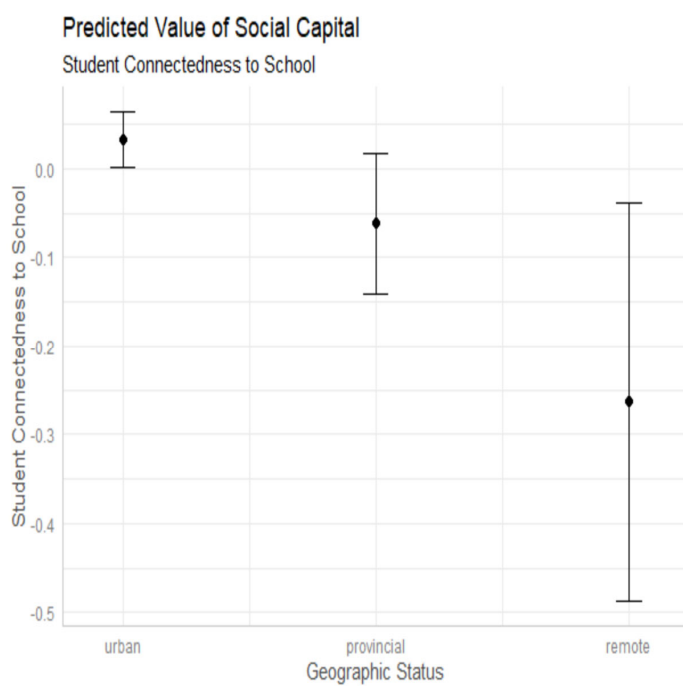
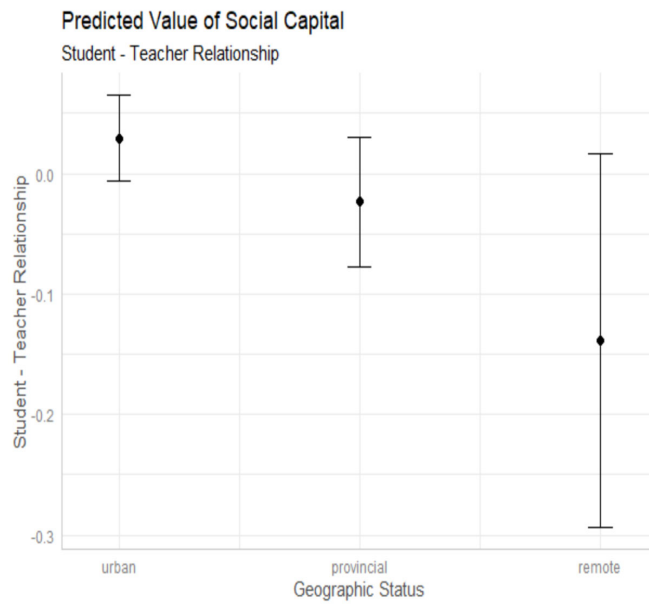
Figure 3.1*Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of Student Connectedness Social Capital*

Figure 3.2

Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of Student Teacher Social Capital

**Figure 3.3**

Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of Peer Influence Social Capital

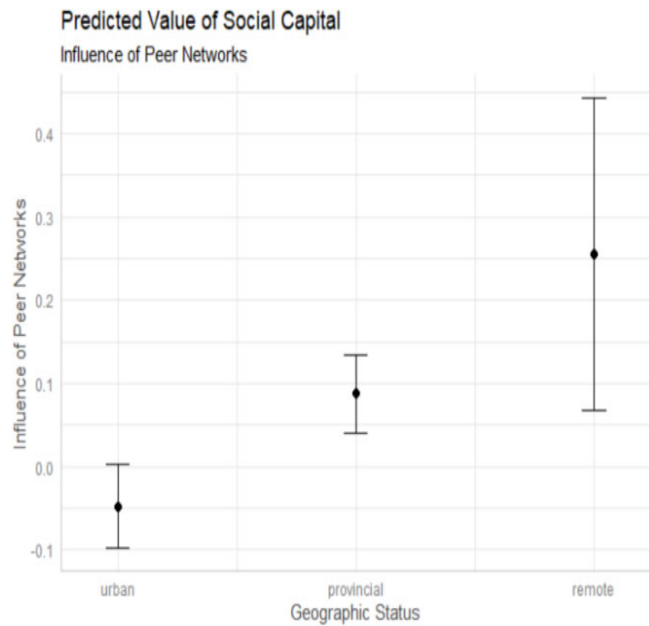
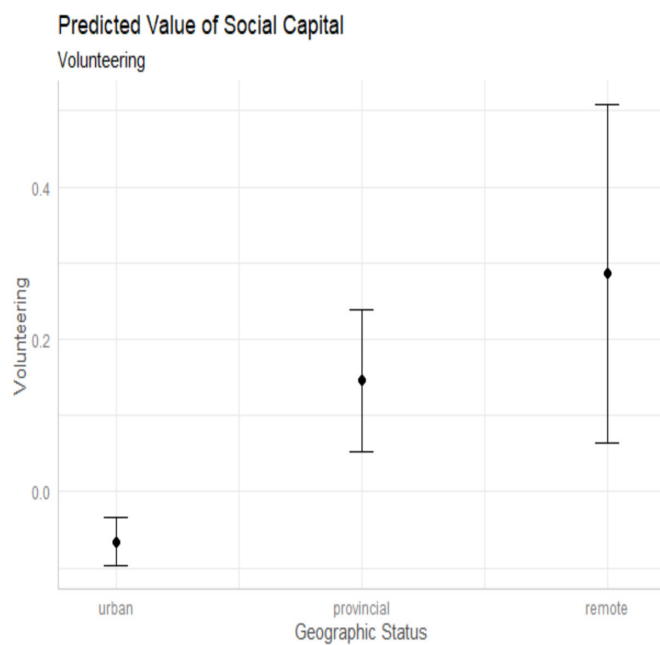


Figure 3.4

Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of Volunteering Social Capital

**Figure 3.5**

Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of Participation in Sports Activities

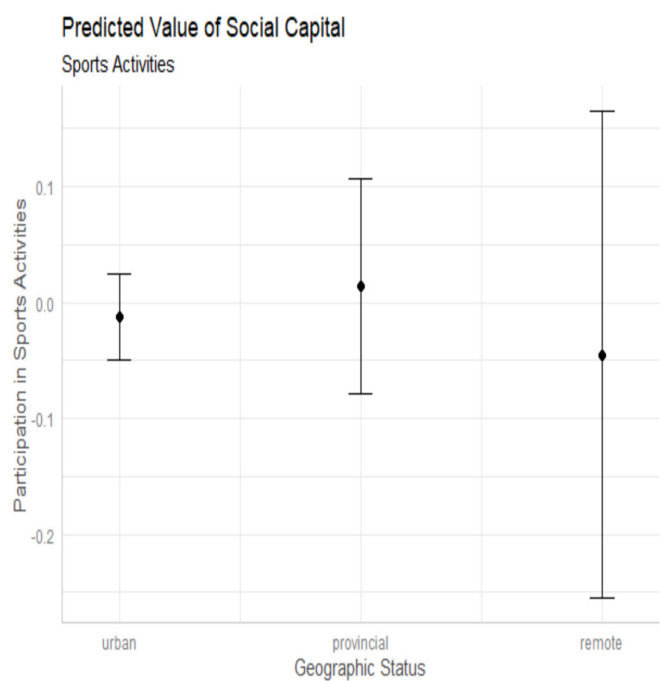
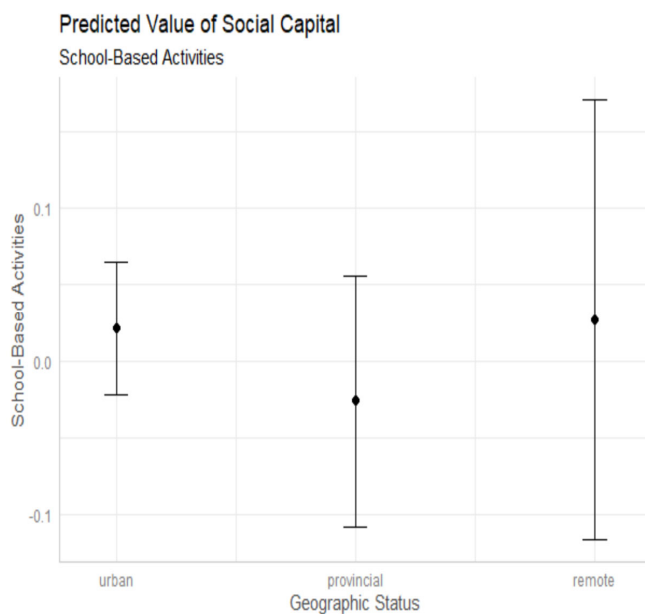


Figure 3.6

Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of Participation in School Based Activities



Summary of Hypothesis 1 Results

Below I summarise the results in which additional demographic and school variables are introduced into the model. Before exploring each social capital variable in turn however, I summarise the difference between youth in urban and rural locations when controlling for other demographics and school variables. The goal here is to see if rural status predicts social capital for youth from similar backgrounds. It is important to note however, that the causal precedents here is unclear. For example, it is unclear if families in rural locations are on average poorer because poorer families move to rural locations (i.e., SES causes rural status) or because a loss of jobs in rural locations has led rural families to be poorer (i.e., rural status causes SES).

In summary, adding additional covariates led to minor changes in results. Youth living in remote and provincial areas remained practically and statistically significantly higher in peer influence and volunteering social capital and at similar levels for participation in sports and school-based activities even when controlling for baseline demographics.

Additionally, youth living in remote areas remained practically and statistically significantly lower in school connectedness social capital. However, student teacher relationship social capital was reduced to a statistically non-significant geographic difference when controlling for baseline demographics. I now go through each of the social capital measures in turn, including the influence of moderation of location with other demographics. Table 3.2b summaries geographic differences with and without controls.

Table 3.2b

Location Differences in Social Capital

Location	Social Capital					
	<i>School</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Peer</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Sport</i>	<i>Volunteer</i>
Provincial difference from Urban	-0.09 [-0.18, -0.01]*	-0.05 [-0.12, -0.01]	0.13 [.07, .20] ***	-0.05 [-.14, .05]	0.03 [-0.07, .13]	.21 [.11, .31] ***
Remote difference from Urban	-0.30 [-0.52, -0.07] *	-0.17 [-0.32, -0.01]*	0.30 [.10, .50] **	0.01 [-0.14, 0.15]	-0.03 [-0.25, .18]	0.04 [.12, .58]**
Provincial difference from Urban controlling for other demographic variables.	-0.06 [-0.15, 0.02]	0.026 [-0.03, 0.08]	0.121 [0.06, 0.18]***	0.041 [-0.05, 0.14]	0.045 [-0.05, 0.14]	0.190 [0.09, 0.20]***
Remote difference from Urban controlling for other demographic variables.	-0.27 [-0.51, -0.02]*	-0.072 [-0.28, 0.13]	0.268 [0.06, 0.47]*	0.127 [0.02, 0.24]*	0.025 [-0.22, 0.27]	0.321[0.02, 0.34]*

Note: z scores

****' p< .001; ***' p=.01; **' p=.05; 95% CI

School Connectedness Social Capital Measure

Table 3.3 presents regression results for school connectedness social capital differences between youth in rural and urban locations when controlling for a variety of co-variates (gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status). Even controlling for baseline demographics there continues to be a moderate to large practically and statistically significant difference between youth in remote and urban locations, such that youth in remote locations were approximately 0.3 of a standard deviation lower in social

capital than youth in urban locations. The difference between youth in provincial and urban locations was not significant when controlling for other demographics.

In addition, model 2 shows that youth from higher SES backgrounds have higher school connectedness social capital than youth from lower SES backgrounds. Indigenous youth have lower school connectedness social capital than non-Indigenous youth. Further, model 2 shows that youth born overseas had lower school connectedness social capital than youth born in Australia to Australian parents.

There was one significant interaction between rural status and migrant status (country of birth). The interaction implies that geographic differences are relatively small for youth born in Australia to Australian parents however there are relatively large geographic differences for first generation youth and youth born overseas. (Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7

Marginal Effects: Predicted Value of School Connectedness Social Capital

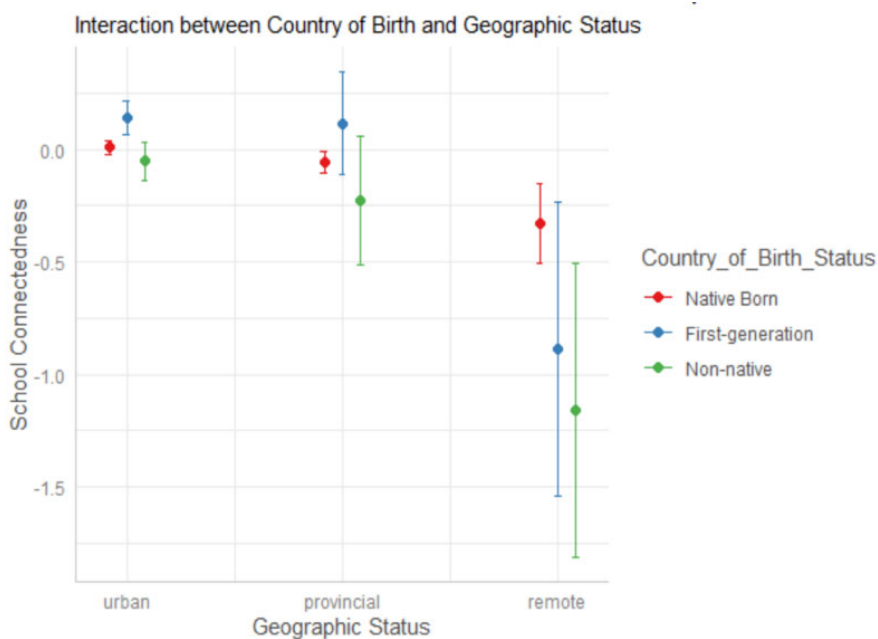


Table 3.3
Location Differences in School Connectedness Social Capital

	Social Capital				
	<i>Model 2 (No Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Gender Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (SES Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Indigenous Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Country of Birth Interaction)</i>
Urban (comparison category)	0.238 [0.106, 0.370]***	0.224 [-0.088, 0.340]**	0.241 [0.107, 0.375]***	0.162 [-0.009, 0.314]*	0.241 [0.106, 0.377]***
Provincial difference from Urban	-0.0616 [-0.147, 0.023]	-0.018 [-0.063, 0.098]	-0.072 [-0.173, 0.029]	0.133 [-0.086, 0.352]	-0.072 [-0.333, 0.188]
Remote difference from Urban	-0.266 [-0.512, -0.021]*	-0.232 [-0.493, 0.028]	-0.274 [-0.512, -0.035]*	-0.485 [-0.937, -0.033]*	-1.19 [-1.71, -0.672]***
Gender Female	0.038 [-0.023, 0.100]	0.082 [0.037, 0.134]**	0.038 [-0.023, 0.100]	0.039 [-0.023, 0.100]	0.039 [-0.022, 0.100]
SES	0.0853 [0.037, 0.133]***	0.087 [0.039, 0.135]***	0.073 [0.035, 0.110]***	0.085 [0.037, 0.133]***	0.086 [0.038, 0.134]***
Indigenous	-0.112 [-0.213, -0.010]*	-0.112 [-0.215, 0.008]*	-0.112 [-0.215, -0.009]*	-0.036 [-0.165, 0.093]	-0.112 [-0.214, 0.101]*
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.158 [-0.241, -0.075]***	-0.155 [-0.238, -0.073]***	-0.154 [-0.236, -0.073]***	-0.157 [-0.240, -0.073]***	-0.163 [-0.250, -0.076]***
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.244 [-0.362, -0.126]***	-0.242 [-0.360, -0.124]***	-0.243 [-0.361, -0.124]***	-0.244 [-0.362, -0.126]***	-0.239 [-0.362, -0.115]***
Gender by Provincial		-0.155 [-0.320, 0.011]			
Gender by Remote		-0.067 [-0.459, 0.325]			
SES by Provincial			0.056 [-0.082, 0.193]		
SES by Remote			-0.052 [-0.382, 0.278]		
Indigenous by Provincial				-0.198 [-0.419, 0.022]	
Indigenous by Remote				0.227 [-0.297, 0.751]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial					0.016 [-0.255, 0.286]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote					0.996 [0.436, 1.56]***
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Provincial					-0.104 [-0.653, 0.445]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Remote					0.163 [-0.914, 1.24]

Note: z-scores **** p< 001; *** p=.01; ** p=.05

Student-Teacher Relationships Social Capital Measure

Table 3.4 presents model 2 regression results for student-teacher relationship social capital differences between youth in provincial, remote, and urban locations when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth and Indigenous status. When controlling for baseline demographics there was no longer a statistically significant difference between youth in remote and urban locations. The results in model 2 showed that, girls had higher student teacher relationship social capital than boys, as did youth from higher SES backgrounds (Table 3.4). Further, no statistically significant interactions were found between geographic status and background demographics for student-teacher relationships social capital.

Table 3.4
Location Differences in Student-Teacher Relationships Social Capital

	Social Capital				
	<i>Model 2 (No Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Gender Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (SES Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Indigenous Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Country of Birth Interaction)</i>
Urban (comparison category)	-0.138 [-0.304, -0.028]*	-0.136 [-0.300, -0.028]	-0.138[-0.305, -0.028]	-0.109 [-0.317, 0.099]	-0.119 [-0.288, 0.050]
Provincial difference from Urban	-0004 [-0.064, 0.056]	-0.010 [-0.097, 0.077]	-0.003 [-0.065, 0.059]	-0.087 [-0.384, 0.210]	-0.211 [-0.462, 0.039]
Remote difference from Urban	-0.109 [-0.284, 0.065]	-0.023 [-0.248, 0.202]	-0.104 [-0.301, 0.092]	0.258 [-0.185, 0.702]	0.117 [-0.440, 0.675]
Gender Female	0.086 [0.032, 0.140]**	0.083 [0.018, 0.149]*	0.086 [0.032, 0.141]**	0.086 [0.032, 0.140]**	0.084 [0.030, 0.139]**
SES	0.157 [0.121, 0.193]***	0.157 [0.121, 0.193]***	0.157 [0.116, 0.199]***	0.157 [0.121, 0.193]***	0.158 [0.122, 0.194]***
Indigenous	0.096 [-0.044, 0.236]	0.096 [-0.044, 0.236]	0.096 [-0.045, 0.237]	0.066 [-0.119, 0.252]	0.093 [-0.048, 0.234]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.032[-0.127, 0.063]	-0.032 [-0.128, 0.063]	-0.032 [-0.127, 0.063]	-0.032 [-0.128, 0.063]	-0.053 [-0.158, 0.051]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	0.019 [-0.098, 0.135]	0.018 [-0.098, 0.135]	0.018 [-0.098, 0.135]	0.018 [-0.098, 0.135]	0.013 [-0.109, 0.135]
Gender by Provincial		0.012 [-0.113, 0.138]			
Gender by Remote		-0.164 [-0.670, 0.343]			
SES by Provincial			-0.006 [-0.080, 0.068]		
SES by Remote			0.224 [-0.012, 0.459]		
Indigenous by Provincial				0.085[-0.222, 0.393]	
Indigenous by Remote				-0.381 [-0.865, 0.104]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial					0.223 [-0.046, 0.492]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote					-0.224 [-0.713, 0.266]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Provincial					0.044 [-0.387, 0.475]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Remote					-0.557 [-1.60, 0.486]

Note: z-scores ***' p< 001; '**' p=.01; '*' p=.05

Influence of Peers and Networks on Future Thinking Social Capital Measure

Table 3.5 presents model 2 regression results for peer social capital differences between youth in provincial, remote, and urban locations when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth and Indigenous status. Even controlling for baseline demographics there continues to be a medium practically and statistically significant difference between youth in urban and remote locations such that youth in remote locations had an approximate 0.3 of a standard deviation higher than youth in urban locations. There also continues to be a modest to large practically and statistically significant difference between youth in provincial and urban locations such that youth in provincial locations had an approximate 0.1 of a standard deviation higher than youth in urban locations.

In addition, model 2 shows that youth from lower SES backgrounds have higher peer influence social capital than youth from higher SES backgrounds. Further, Indigenous youth have lower peer influence than non-Indigenous youth. Additionally, youth born in Australia to Australian parents have higher peer influence than youth born overseas.

No statistically significant interactions were found between geographic status and background demographics for peer influence social capital.

Table 3.5
Location Differences in Influence of Peer Influence Social Capital

	Social Capital				
	<i>Model 2 (No Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Gender Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (SES Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Indigenous Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Country of Birth Interaction)</i>
Urban (comparison category)	0.315 [0.168, 0.463]***	0.315 [0.169, 0.461]***	0.312 [0.163, 0.461]***	0.385 [0.194, 0.575]***	0.334 [0.178, 0.490]***
Provincial difference from Urban	0.130 [0.067, 0.193]***	0.131 [0.017, 0.245]*	0.140 [0.074, 0.206]***	-0.045 [-0.351, 0.261]	-0.054 [-0.339, 0.229]
Remote difference from Urban	0.281 [0.076, 0.486]**	0.240 [0.049, 0.430]*	0.290 [0.088, 0.491]**	0.394 [-0.052, 0.841]	-0.381 [-1.30, 0.533]
Gender Female	-0.032 [-0.094, 0.030]	-0.0317 [-0.105, 0.041]	-0.031[-0.094, 0.031]	-0.032 [-0.094, 0.030]	-0.032 [-0.094, 0.029]
SES	-0.091 [-0.130, -0.052]***	-0.091 [-0.130, -0.052]***	-0.076 [-0.127, -0.030]**	-0.091 [-0.130, -0.051]***	-0.090 [-0.129, -0.050]***
Indigenous	-0.193 [-0.316, -0.071]**	-0.193 [-0.316, -0.070]**	-0.192 [-0.315, -0.069]**	-0.263 [-0.422, -0.104]**	-0.196 [-0.318, -0.073]**
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.147 [-0.249, -0.043]**	-0.146 [-0.249, -0.044]**	-0.150 [-0.254, -0.046]**	-0.148 [-0.251, -0.044]**	-0.168 [-0.284, -0.052]**
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.125 [-0.284, 0.034]	-0.125 [-0.284, 0.033]	-0.127 [-0.285, 0.032]	-0.125 [-0.284, 0.033]	-0.133[-0.300, 0.034]
Gender by Provincial		-0.002[-0.159, 0.155]			
Gender by Remote		0.079[-0.565, 0.723]			
SES by Provincial			-0.052 [-0.134, 0.031]		
SES by Remote			0.132 [-0.272, 0.535]		
Indigenous by Provincial				0.179 [-0.121, 0.480]	
Indigenous by Remote				-0.118 [-0.600, 0.365]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial					0.199 [-0.105, 0.503]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote					0.697 [-0.168, 1.56]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Provincial					-0.041 [-0.395, 0.478]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Remote					0.777 [-0.280, 1.83]

Note: z-scores **** p < 0.01; *** p = .01; ** p = .05

Participation in School-Based Activities Social Capital Measure

Table 3.6 presents model 2 regression results for school-based activities social capital differences between youth in rural and urban locations when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status. Even controlling for baseline demographics there continues to be a small practically and statistically significant difference between youth in remote and urban locations, such that youth in remote locations were approximately 0.1 of a standard deviation higher than youth in urban locations. The difference between youth in provincial and urban locations was no longer significant.

In addition, model 2 shows that girls had higher school-based activities social capital than boys. Further, youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds had higher school-based activities social capital than youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, youth born overseas had lower school-based activities social capital than youth born in Australia to Australian parents.

Model 3 shows there was one significant interaction between rural status and migrant status (country of birth). The interaction implies that the remote advantage in this variable was present only for youth born in Australia to Australian born parents and not for other groups. Indeed, there was some evidence that urban first-generation participants had higher levels of school-based activities social capital than such youth in provincial or remote locations (see Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8

Marginal Effects Plot: Predicted Value of Participation in School-Based Activities Social Capital: Interaction between Country of Birth and Geographic Status

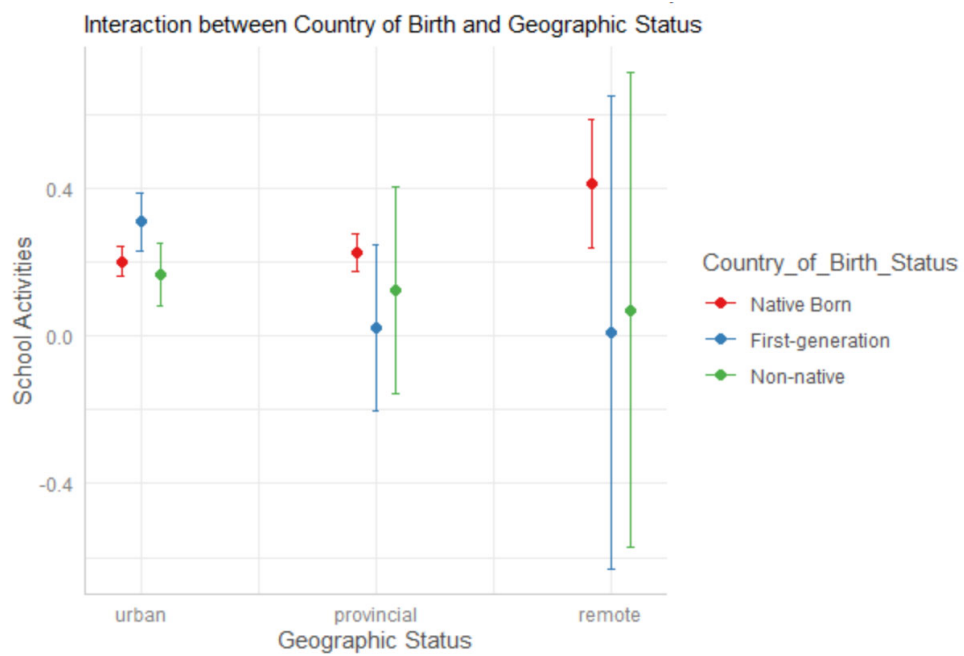


Table 3.6*Location Differences in School Based Activities Social Capital*

	Social Capital				
	<i>Model 2 (No Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Gender Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (SES Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Indigenous Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Country of Birth Interaction)</i>
Urban (comparison category)	-0.193 [-0.373, -0.013]*	-0.180 [-0.361, 0.002]	-0.193 [-0.372, -0.013]*	-0.166 [-0.379, 0.047]	-0.170 [-0.355, -0.016]
Provincial difference from Urban	0.021 [-0.070, 0.114]	-0.020 [-0.142, 0.101]	0.021 [-0.068, 0.110]	-0.053 [-0.289, 0.183]	-0.216 [-0.513, 0.080]
Remote difference from Urban	0.098 [-0.018, 0.216]*	0.209 [-0.007, 0.425]*	0.093 [-0.046, 0.233]	0.388 [-0.288, 1.06]	-0.523 [-1.09, 0.039]
Gender Female	0.368 [0.315, 0.421]***	0.346 [0.278, 0.414]***	0.368 [0.315, 0.421]***	0.368 [0.315, 0.421]***	0.367 [0.314, 0.420]***
SES	0.243 [0.201, 0.285]***	0.242 [0.200, 0.284]***	0.243 [0.191, 0.295]***	0.243 [0.201, 0.285]***	0.244 [0.202, 0.286]***
Indigenous	0.053 [-0.086, 0.194]	0.053 [-0.009, 0.193]	0.053 [-0.086, 0.194]	-0.027 [-0.147, 0.200]	0.052 [-0.089, 0.193]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.126 [-0.241, -0.012]*	-0.128 [-0.242, -0.013]*	-0.127 [-0.241, -0.012]*	-0.127 [-0.242, -0.012]*	-0.152 [-0.274, -0.029]*
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.144 [-0.282, -0.006]*	-0.145 [-0.283, -0.008]*	-0.144 [-0.281, 0.006]*	-0.144 [-0.282, -0.006]*	-0.161 [-0.299, -0.023]*
Gender by Provincial		0.082 [-0.073, 0.236]			
Gender by Remote		-0.208 [-0.613, 0.196]			
SES by Provincial			0.002 [-0.072, 0.077]		
SES by Remote			-0.218 [-0.462, 0.026]		
Indigenous by Provincial				0.076 [-0.175, 0.327]	
Indigenous by Remote				-0.299 [-0.969, 0.370]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial					0.251 [-0.049, 0.552]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote					0.664 [0.106, 1.22]*
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Provincial					0.184 [-0.332, 0.699]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Remote					0.403 [-0.355, 1.16]

Note: z-scores ****' p< 001; ***' p=.01; '**' p=.05

Participation in Sport Activities Social Capital Measure

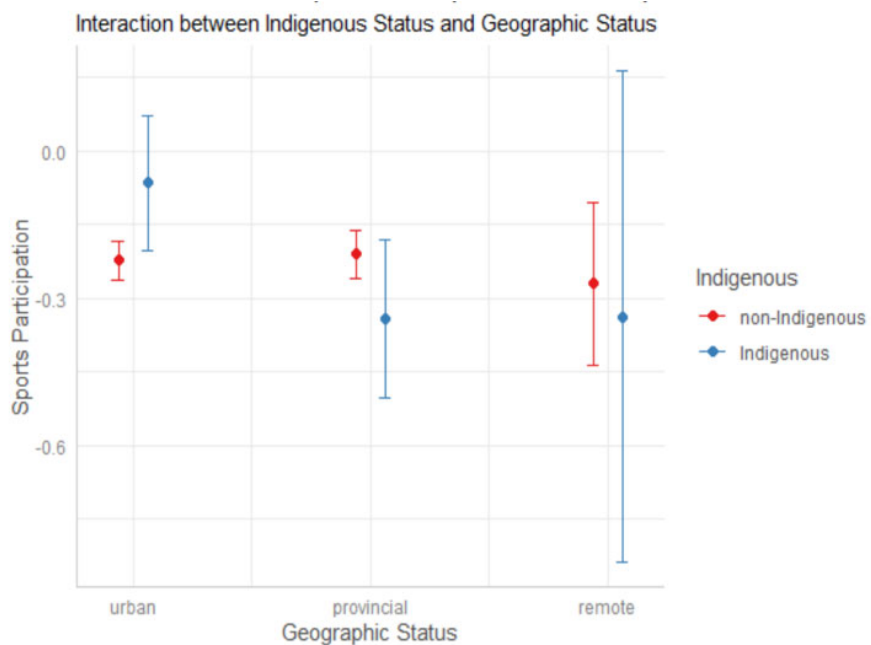
Table 3.7 model 2 presents regression results for sport activities social capital differences between youth in rural and urban locations when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status. When controlling for baseline demographics there remains no significant difference between youth in rural and urban locations.

In addition, model 2 shows that youth from higher SES backgrounds have higher sport activities social capital than youth from lower SES backgrounds and boys have higher sport activities social capital than girls. Further, youth born in Australia to Australian parents have higher sports activities social capital than youth born overseas.

There are some statistically significant interactions, including between geographic location and Indigenous status, geographic location and migrant status, and geographic location and gender. The interaction between Indigenous status and geographic location implies that geographic differences are larger for Indigenous youth than non-Indigenous youth (Figure 3.9). Further, the interaction between gender and geographic location implies that geographic differences are larger for girls than for boys (Figure 3.10). Additionally, the interaction between youth born in Australia to Australian parents and geographic location implies that geographic differences are larger for youth born in Australia to Australian parents than for first generation youth and youth born overseas (Figure 3.11).

Figure 3.9

Marginal Effects Plot: Predicted Value of Participation in Sports Social Capital: Interaction between Indigenous Status and Geographic Status

**Figure 3.10**

Marginal Effects Plot Predicted Value of Participation in Sports Activities Social Capital: Interaction between Gender and Geographic Location

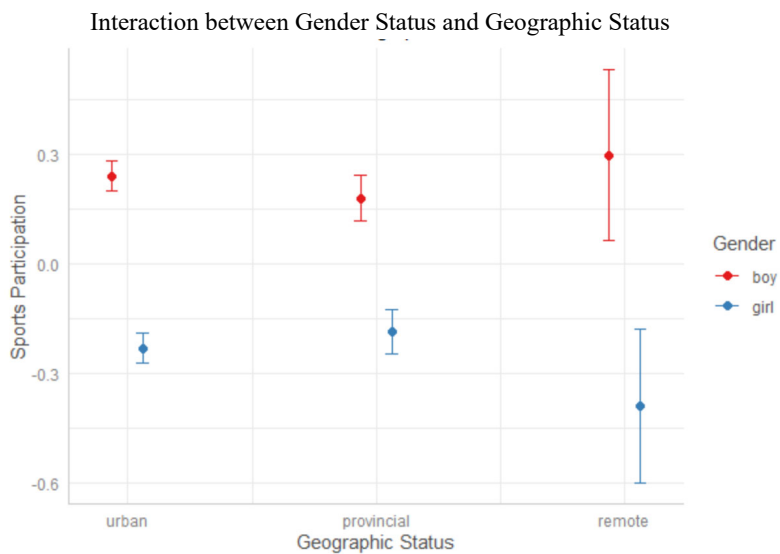


Figure 3.11

Marginal Effects Plot Predicted Value of Participation in Sports Activities Social Capital: Interaction between Country of Birth and Geographic Location

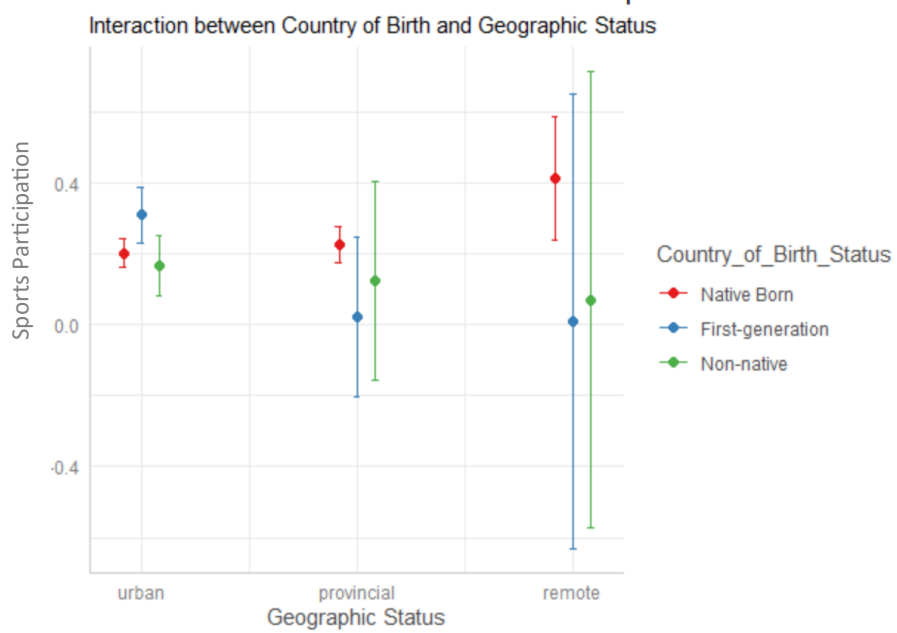


Table 3.7*Location Differences in Sport Participation Social Capital*

	Social Capital				
	<i>Model 2 (No Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Gender Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (SES Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Indigenous Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Country of Birth Interaction)</i>
Urban (comparison category)	-0.019 [-0.158, 0.118]*	-0.011 [-0.153, 0.132]	-0.024 [-0.160, 0.113]*	0.081 [-0.079, 0.242]	-0.017 [-0.161, -0.126]
Provincial difference from Urban	0.020 [-0.079, 0.120]	-0.009 [-0.188, 0.170]	0.031 [-0.069, 0.133]	-0.226 [-0.434, -0.019]*	0.033 [-0.191, 0.257]
Remote difference from Urban	-0.011 [-0.232, 0.210]	0.242 [-0.119, 0.603]	-0.003 [-0.222, 0.215]	-0.168 [-0.850, 0.513]	-0.627[-0.926,-0.328]***
Gender Female	-0.446 [-0.521 -0.371]***	-0.459 [-0.532, -0.386]***	-0.445 [-0.521, -0.370]***	-0.446 [-0.521, -0.371]***	-0.446 [-0.522, -0.370]***
SES	0.104 [0.067, 0.140]***	0.104 [0.067, 0.140]***	0.120 [0.078, 0.161]***	0.104 [0.067, 0.140]***	0.104 [0.067, 0.141]***
Indigenous	0.051 [-0.057, 0.161]	0.050 [-0.059, 0.160]	0.052 [-0.054, 0.160]	-0.050 [-0.194, -0.093]	0.050 [-0.059, 0.159]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	0.197 [0.119, 0.275]***	0.195 [0.117, 0.274]***	0.192 [-0.113, 0.271]***	0.195 [0.117, 0.273]***	0.194 [0.108, 0.279]***
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	0.003 [-0.110, 0.117]	0.012 [-0.112, 0.116]	0.001 [-0.111, 0.114]	-0.003 [-0.110, 0.117]	0.016 [-0.099, 0.132]
Gender by Provincial		0.056 [-0.157, 0.269]			
Gender by Remote		-0.480 [-0.852, -0.108]*			
SES by Provincial			-0.062 [-0.146, 0.021]		
SES by Remote			0.024 [-0.263, 0.311]		
Indigenous by Provincial				0.252 [0.030, 0.474]*	
Indigenous by Remote				0,161 [-0.559, 0.881]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial					-0.006 [-0.261, 0.249]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote					0.646 [0,169, 1.12]**
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Provincial					-0.221 [-0.599, 0.156]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Remote					0.751 [-0.038, 1.46]

Note: z-scores ****' p< 001; ***' p=.01; '**' p=.05

Volunteering Social Capital Measure

Table 3.8 model 2 presents regression results for the volunteering social capital differences between youth in rural and urban locations when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, and Indigenous status. Even controlling for baseline demographics there continues to be a moderate practically and statistically significant difference of approximately .2 of a standard deviation between youth in provincial and urban locations. Additionally, there continues to be a large practically and statistically significant difference between youth in provincial and urban locations, such that youth in remote locations had an approximate 0.4 of a standard deviation lower than youth in urban locations.

In addition, model 2 shows youth from lower SES backgrounds have higher volunteering social capital than youth from higher SES backgrounds. Further, youth born in Australia to Australian parents have lower volunteering social capital than youth born overseas.

There was one statistically significant interaction between rural status and gender. The interaction implies that geographic differences are larger for boys than for girls (see Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.12

Marginal Effects Plot: Predicted Value of Volunteering Social Capital: Interaction between Gender and Geographic Status

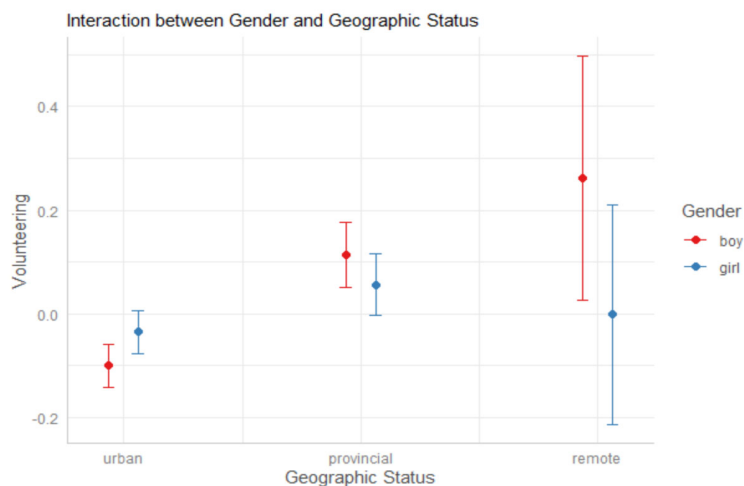


Table 3.8*Location Differences in Volunteering Social Capital*

	Social Capital				
	<i>Model 2 (No Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Gender Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (SES Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Indigenous Interaction)</i>	<i>Model 3 (Country of Birth Interaction)</i>
Urban (comparison category)	0.086 [-0.066, 0.240]	0.051 [0.000, 0.206]*	0.087 [-0.066, 0.241]**	0.092 [0.064, 0.250]	0.075 [-0.074, 0.225]
Provincial difference from Urban	0.207 [0.108, 0.307]***	0.323 [0.000, 0.492]***	0.203 [0.103, 0.305]***	0.199 [-0.068, 0.468]	0.344 [0.025, 0.664]*
Remote difference from Urban	0.345 [0.115, 0.577]**	0.637 [0.000, 0.945]***	0.344 [0.112, 0.577]**	0.029 [-0.710, 0.768]	0.530 [-0.213, 1.27]
Gender Female	-0.001 [-0.069, 0.068]	0.065 [0.000, 0.131]	-0.001 [-0.070, 0.068]	-0.001[-0.069, 0.068]	-0.000 [-0.069, 0.069]
SES	-0.055 [-0.091, 0.020]**	-0.055 [0.000, 0.077]**	-0.059 [-0.103, -0.017]**	-0.056 [-0.091, -0.020]**	-0.055 [-0.091, 0.020]**
Indigenous	-0.056 [-0.193, 0.079]	-0.058 [0.000, -0.005]	-0.057 [-0.193, 0.789]	-0.063 [-0.206, 0.079]	-0.056 [-0.192, 0.078]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.091 [-0.174, -0.009]*	-0.088 [0.000, -0.005]*	-0.091 [-0.174, -0.008]*	-0.092 [-0.175, -0.009]*	-0.079 [-0.167, -0.008]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.045 [-0.170, 0.078]	-0.043 [0.000, 0.079]	-0.045 [-0.168, 0.078]	-0.045 [-0.170, 0.078]	-0.027 [-0.159, 0.105]
Gender by Provincial		-0.226 [0.000, -0.048]*			
Gender by Remote		-0.557 [0.000, -0.292]***			
SES by Provincial			0.016 [-0.071, 0.103]		
SES by Remote			0.016 [-0.153, 0.186]		
Indigenous by Provincial				0.007 [-0.272, 0.286]	
Indigenous by Remote				0.327 [-0.454, 1.11]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial					-0.139 [-0.462, 0.182]
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote					-0.209 [-0.985, 0.566]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Provincial					-0.261 [-0.764, 0.241]
Migrant Status: Born Overseas by Remote					0.291 [-1.26, 1.84]

Note: z-scores **** p<.001; *** p=.01; ** p=.05

Discussion

This study took a quantitative perspective to explore social capital differences between youth in rural and urban Australia. Specifically, this study quantified amounts and types of social capital experienced by youth in different geographic locations intersected by social group attributes.

Differences in Amount and Type of Social Capital

Overall, differences were found in the amount and type of social capital between youth in rural and urban Australia. Youth in rural locations had higher or similar amounts of social capital than youth in urban locations in four out of the six social capital measures; peer and network influence on future thinking, participation in sports, participation in school-based activities, and volunteering social capital. Youth in urban locations had higher amounts of social capital than youth in rural locations in only two of the social capital measures: school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital. The findings highlight the importance of considering geographic location when assessing social capital and its impact on communities. Equally, the results highlight the importance of asking the question what type of social capital when considering geographic differences in social capital.

Youth in Rural Areas Experience Less School Connectedness and Student-Teacher Relationship Social Capital

My findings differ from the perspective in the literature that suggests rural schools within smaller communities will facilitate relationship building with teachers and a sense of belonging (Dee et al., 2007; Nelson, 2016; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Byun et al., 2012; Hardre et al., 2009). Interestingly, my findings seem to indicate that youth in rural areas are less likely to feel connected to their schools and teachers, despite the smaller size of the school and community. In other words, youth in rural areas might experience less bonding social capital, in terms of school connectedness and student-teacher relationships, than their urban counterparts.

Bourdieu's theories provide a valuable framework for exploring the differences in social capital experienced by youth in rural locations compared to youth in urban locations, and for understanding how these differences can influence educational aspirations and outcomes. In my results, youth in urban locations were found to experience more of the school-related social capital measures compared to their rural counterparts, suggesting they may be able to obtain these forms of social capital more readily. This could be due partly to urban values and norms being privileged over rural values and norms in society and in education (Bourdieu, 1986). As such, youth whose "rural" habitus is in conflict with the urban-centric norms of the education field often find it challenging to navigate the schooling systems as effectively as their urban counterparts (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992).

Additionally, teachers may also inadvertently privilege certain forms of capital, such as urban capital, while undervaluing other forms, such as rural capital. This can lead to an underestimation of students' abilities resulting in difficulty obtaining school social capital and educational success (Speybroeck, Kuppens, Van Damme, Van Petegem, Lamote, Boonen & de Bilde, 2012; Burke, 2013; Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2017).

Hence, urban privileging may facilitate access to school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital for youth in urban Australia, while simultaneously disadvantaging their rural counterparts. My results support this, suggesting that youth in rural locations experience more challenges in accessing school-connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital, compared to their urban counterparts. It is also useful to note that these types of social capital tend to occur among homogenous populations and can be inclusive or exclusive depending on the position of the group in society (Bourdieu, 1986).

Youth in Rural Areas Experience More Peer Influence, Volunteering and Sport Social Capital

In contrast, youth in provincial locations experienced substantially more peer influence social capital compared to youth in urban locations, with a moderate to large difference that was practically and statistically significant. While there was a small increase in

sports-related social capital for provincial youth, this difference was not statistically significant. The amount of school-based activities social capital experienced was similar for both groups of youth (provincial and urban). Further, youth from provincial locations experienced substantially more volunteering social capital, when compared to youth in urban locations, with a large practically and statistically significant difference.

Youth in remote locations had substantially more peer influence social capital than youth in urban locations, with a moderate to large practically and statistically significant difference. They also had substantially more volunteering social capital, with a large practically and statistically significant difference. Additionally, youth in remote locations had small but statistically non-significant differences in sport and school-based activities social capital. Overall, my study revealed that youth in rural locations were consistently higher in peer influence, volunteering and sport social capital which are considered to be both bonding and bridging.

Notably, there were large practical and statistically significant differences for peer influence social capital and volunteer social capital between youth in provincial and remote locations and their urban counterparts. Additionally, these differences remained significant even when accounting for a range of social demographics.

The substantially higher amounts of peer influence social capital found for youth in rural locations is likely due to the strong bonds formed within small, tight-knit communities. In these communities, the smaller populations and limited range of social connections have been found to intensify relationships, thereby enabling peer social capital (Corra, 2015; Corbett, 2007; Beasley, 2016; Beggs et al., 1996; Sorensen, 2016).

Furthermore, the higher amount of volunteering social capital is likely also due to the smaller size of rural communities, where youth have connections with many people, facilitating opportunities for volunteering. Limited recreational activities may also lead youth in rural areas to undertake volunteering as another avenue for skill development and social

engagement, as well as a strategic method to expand social networks that potentially lead to employment opportunities, especially in rural areas with limited economic resources and employment (Pearce, Kristjansson, Lemyre & Takacs, 2023; Handy, Cnaan, Hustinx, Kang et al, 2010; Hwang, Grabb & Curtis, 2005). Additionally, the local culture and values of small communities may also encourage youth participation in volunteering, thus enabling access to volunteering social capital (Bailey, Savage & O'Connell, 2003; Paarlberg, Nesbit, Choi & Moss, 2022).

Youth in Rural Areas Experience Strong Bonding Social Capital

These findings are consistent with the literature that indicates youth in rural areas will have more bonding social capital, such as peer social capital, due to the relationships formed with peers, friends, and family in smaller close-knit communities (Cuervo et al., 2019; Sorensen, 2016; Corra, 2015; Corbett, 2007; Beasley, 2016). Additionally, my findings on volunteering social capital support literature which indicate that youth in rural areas have high levels of volunteering (Paarlberg et al., 2022; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). However, this finding differs from the general perspective that youth in rural areas have less bridging social capital suggesting that youth in rural areas may have access to certain types of bridging social capital.

Furthermore, my findings on sports social capital slightly differed from some studies that indicate youth in rural areas may have less of these types of leisure and extracurricular social capital, such as sports social capital, due to the infrastructure and limited availability of these activities in smaller communities (Cuervo et al., 2019). This suggests that, despite the potentially limited availability of activities, sports social capital may be more readily accessible for youth in rural areas potentially due to the cultural norms and value placed on sports (Atherley, 2006; Tonts, 2005).

Practical Significance of Small to Moderate Differences in Social Capital

It is worth noting, that even the small to moderate differences in social capital between youth in rural and urban Australia, as identified in my findings, are of practical significance in the context of Bourdieu's social capital theory. Bourdieu's theory highlights a social reproduction approach based on social group membership (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992). Therefore, slight variations in social capital between youth in urban and rural locations may point to deeper structural inequalities that perpetuate disadvantage or advantage, even in the context of seemingly small differences in social capital.

The Significance of Rural and Urban Structures

This draws attention to how the social structures of "rural" and "urban" can have real effects on the social capital that youth experience. For example, we know that social capital is tied to institutional resources, such as higher education, therefore, these seemingly small differences could have real-life impact on differences in access to resources that enable the choice to aspire to higher education, between youth in rural and urban areas. My results found differences in socioeconomic status within each geographic location that reflected urban-rural differences, such that youth from high socioeconomic backgrounds had more school-related social capital and less peer influence and volunteering social capital.

Youth in Rural Areas Experience More Social Capital Overall

Further, my study found that youth in rural Australia experienced more social capital in general than their urban counterparts. This finding is interesting and can potentially contribute to the literature base, as there are varied perspectives in the literature in relation to whether youth in rural areas or youth in urban areas have more social capital overall (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Lannoo et al., 2012; Sorensen, 2016; Cuervo et al., 2019).

However, despite finding that youth in rural Australia had more social capital, we know that youth in urban Australia have better outcomes in higher education than youth in rural Australia. If social capital plays a key role in geographic inequalities in higher education

(university) aspirations, then the question that needs to be posed is about types of social capital rather than just the overall quantity of social capital.

Which Types of Social Capital Are Important for Higher Education Aspirations

Further, it raises the question of which types of social capital are important for higher education outcomes. In other words, which social capital measures are positively or negatively associated with higher education aspirations and outcomes, and does school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital matter more than peer influence, participation in sports, participation in school-based activities, and volunteering social capital for youth in relation to higher education aspiration and outcomes? These considerations are the focus of my next quantitative study (Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis).

As previously noted having more social capital may not necessarily translate into improved educational aspirations and outcomes. As I will discuss in my systematic review study, presented in Chapter 5: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review, the main discourse in social capital has predominantly taken a normative approach, with the assumption that an increase in social capital is inherently positive for youth. This approach, however, has been challenged and problematised from a social reproduction perspective to understand that social capital can be seen as negative, neutral, or positive, which can shape education outcomes differently depending on which capital is valued in society and education systems (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992; Morrow, 1999; Bottrell, 2007; de Souza Briggs, 1997; Stablein, 2011).

Possible Positive, Negative, and Neutral Social Capital Associations with Higher Education Aspirations

As such, my results found that youth in rural locations may have some possible advantages and disadvantages in social capital which can be potentially neutral, positive, or

negative for higher education aspirations. For example, bonding social capital, such as peer influence, which youth in rural locations were found to have more of in my study, is generally thought to have a negative association with higher education aspirations (Holland, 2009). There are likely several factors that may influence a negative association between peer influence social capital and higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas including strong bonds of trust and solidarity with family, friends, and community that may influence and reinforce aspirations to a different path, other than higher education, if this is not considered the norm or expectation within their peer networks (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; Bachechi, 2015). This will be more fully explored in Chapter 6.

In contrast, school-related social capital, such as student-teacher relationship and school connectedness social capital, which youth in rural areas were found to have less of in my study, is generally thought to have a positive association with higher education. School-related social capital, which is both bonding and bridging, has been identified as an important and valuable source of social capital, contributing to educational achievement and sense of belonging or connectedness to the school (Mensah & Koomson, 2020; Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004; Ellison, Wohn & Greenhow, 2014; Esveld, 2004).

Research highlights the critical role of student-teacher relationships. Positive student-teacher relationships have been shown to not only foster supportive learning environments but also improve students' attitudes towards school, both of which contribute to improving educational achievement (Banks, 2010; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Bourdieu, 1986; Fullarton, 2002; Thomson & Hillman, 2010). Further, in rural areas, educational aspirations have been found to be shaped by interactions with teachers, as well as family, peers, and wider community networks (Ellison et al., 2014; Elder, 1996). Additionally, participation in sport is generally thought to be positive for higher education aspirations as they can widen youths' community networks and influences (Tonts, 2005; Atherley, 2006; Spaaij, 2009).

These forms of social capital in which youth have interactions with other members in the community (such as teachers and sports coaches) have been shown to shape youths' aspirations towards higher education and careers (Ellison et al., 2014; Esveld, 2004; Elder, 1996). For this reason, bridging social capital, in particular, has often been focused on by policy makers for educational interventions to assist youth from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve education outcomes.

An Intersectional Lens

When an intersectional lens was taken in this study, although some interactions were found between geographic location, type of social capital, and social group demographics, overall, they were intermittent and minor. Additionally, there were some gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth, and Indigenous status differences which were found to be parallel to geographic location rather than significantly interacting with geographic location. I will now briefly outline some interactions found in this study.

School Related Social Capital

Migrant Status

One significant interaction was found between rural status and migrant status (country of birth) for school connectedness social capital. The geographic differences for youth born in Australia to Australian parents were relatively small compared to the geographic differences for first generation youth and youth born overseas, suggesting that first generation youth and youth born overseas have a different experience in rural areas that lessens connections with their school. One reason could be the lower numbers of recent immigrants in smaller provincial and remote areas, compared to urban areas, which may position them outside of the dominant community groups, thus affecting their access to resources and social capital (Feliciano, 2006; Marks, Ejesi & Garcia, 2014).

Research shows that having a strong community and social network can help immigrant children do well in school. However, in areas where there aren't many immigrants,

it is harder for families to find support and build connections, which in turn may negatively affect school relationships (Bankston, 2004). Thus, it may be harder for first generation youth and youth born overseas to feel connected to their schools and teachers in rural locations where there are fewer immigrants. This is contrasted by the significant interaction finding where first generation youth in urban locations, where there is likely a larger immigrant population, were significantly more involved in school-based activities than first generation youth in provincial and remote locations. This suggests that the density of the immigrant population in an area may influence access to school-related social capital. Interestingly, youth born in Australian to Australian born parents in remote locations were found to be much more involved in school-based activities than in provincial or urban locations.

Sports Social Capital

Gender

The geographic differences for girls were relatively larger compared to geographic differences for boys, with a significant interaction between remote status and girls, suggesting that girls have a different experience in remote areas which decreases their participation in sports. There are likely several reasons for these differences, including a more limited availability of organised sports activities for girls in remote locations. This issue could be compounded by more traditional views, that may be more rigidly held to in provincial and remote areas, that sports are primarily for boys. Additionally, the potentially higher costs to participate due to travelling to facilities may influence decisions further for girls not to participate, especially for lower socioeconomic families in remote areas (Tonts, 2005; Bevan, Drummond, Abery, Elliot, Pennesi, Prichard, Lewis & Drummond, 2020; Eime, Harvey, Charity & Payne, 2016).

Indigenous Status

Indigenous youth were found to have large geographic differences between urban and rural categories, with a significant interaction between Indigenous status and urban status.

This suggests that Indigenous youth experience differences in urban areas that leads to increased sport participation. Although there are limited studies directly comparing sports participation for Indigenous youth between urban and rural Australia, some possible contributing factors have been identified in the general research on this topic. Urban areas typically have a greater availability of diverse organised sports and facilities, as well as more community organisation and programs to support participation of Indigenous youth, which may lead to higher engagement in sports.

In contrast, it has been found that there are barriers to participation in Indigenous communities in rural Australia, with lack of services and program, and high costs, compared to urban areas. Further, Indigenous youth may experience less support, due to cultural and social barriers, to participate in organised sports activities in rural areas compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Dalton, Wilson, Evans & Cochrane, 2015; Evans, Wilson, Coleman, Man & Olds, 2018). Given these insights, and knowing the benefits of sport for Indigenous youth, this is an area that would benefit from further research (Dalton et al., 2015). Conversely, youth born in Australia to Australian parents in remote areas showed increased sports participation, possibly driven by different community dynamics and better access to local sports facilities. These contrasting scenarios underline the complex interplay of cultural, social, and structural factors.

Volunteering Social Capital

Gender

Additionally, a significant interaction was found geographic location and gender for volunteering social capital. The interaction implies that geographic differences are larger for boys than for girls, suggesting that boys experience differences in rural areas that increase their participation in volunteering. Although, there is limited research on gender differences for youth on this topic, drawing on general research some likely reasons why boys in rural areas volunteer more than their urban counterparts include, strong community ties,

community values that promote volunteering, and additionally the limited leisure and employment opportunities in rural areas means that volunteering offers a good way of gaining skills and possible employment (Duarte Alonso & Nyanjom, 2016; Handy et al., 2010). In contrast, some studies suggest that women's greater involvement in household and caregiving roles might influence their volunteering patterns, potentially limiting their availability to volunteer compared to men (Choi, Burr, Mutchler, & Caro, 2007).

These findings highlight the need for more nuanced intersectional research that takes a social reproduction perspective to further understand the complex interactions between various social demographic variables, including gender, geographic location, and social capital (Healy, Haynes & Hampshire, 2007).

To fully explore these interactions and tease out unique nuances that could only be glimpsed in this study qualitative methods would be better suited. This is one of the reasons why I undertook a qualitative systematic review presented in Chapter 5. The review highlighted the need for intersectionality to see the nuanced complexity of cumulative disadvantages, such as Indigenous youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds living in remote locations.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

The current quantitative study which drew on large-scale datasets was important as it provided generalised findings and quantified the amounts and types of social capital obtained by youth in rural and urban Australia. However, this study also has some limitations that should be considered, as well as directions for future research.

This study was able to account for several important background factors however the study was correlational in nature. Further, this study highlighted the importance of an intersectional approach to break down data to reveal nuance and complexity. Importantly, my results were able to provide findings on statistically significant interactions as was highlighted

in the discussion. Nevertheless, quantitative approaches to intersectionality can be blunt tools and fail to reveal the complexity of multiple identities intersection. It would be useful to be able to do further qualitative intersectional investigation to investigate these interactions further.

As noted previously, the dataset is from 2003 and, as such, may not reflect recent advancements in technology and communication. Yet, the emphasis on fundamental deeply rooted social processes that are of interest in this social capital study likely remain just as important in 2023 as they were in 2003. Therefore, while it is important to recognise the data's age, this investigation into enduring social patterns provides important knowledge that remains applicable.

Additionally, as also noted above the causal precedents between variables like location and socioeconomic status remain unclear. Nevertheless, the finding that results remained robust even accounting for demographic background variables is reassuring.

Further, in the current quantitative study we worked with urban, provincial, and remote groupings of students. This is important to be able to provide generalisable results allowing for persistent patterns of inequity to be seen in the relationship between social capital and geographic location. However, I acknowledge the varied nature and diversity of youth and their rural communities in Australia. As outlined in Chapter 1, it is not my intention to homogenise the experiences of youth in rural areas or to homogenise rural areas. However, it is important to quantitatively examine the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations, due to the use of social capital and higher education aspirations in discourses that often normalise urban life while “othering” rural life.

A quantitative approach was essential as it provided generalised findings and quantification of the amount and type of social capital experienced, providing valuable insights about the geographic locations and groups of people for which these results were valid. This finding would not be possible with qualitative methods alone.

Future Direction

Social capital is increasingly being drawn on to explain how youth from underrepresented backgrounds are able to mediate the effects of disadvantage to improve education outcomes. As such, it would be useful to understand the mediation association of social capital and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia to determine the usefulness of a focus on social capital in interventions. I will explore this in my next study presented in Chapter 3: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis, which will look at the mediation association of social capital and higher education aspirations for youth in rural and urban Australia.

Conclusion

This study found that geography served as a predictor of social capital. Differences in amount and type of social capital were found between youth in rural and urban Australia. The findings highlight the importance of considering geographic location when assessing social capital and its impact on communities.

Youth in rural Australia were found to have more social capital overall than their urban counterparts. Specifically, in four out of the six social capital measures examined, including peer influence, participation in sports, participation in school-based activities, and volunteering social capital. It was argued that these four social capital measures have a neutral or negative association with higher education aspirations. Additionally, it was argued that the two social capital measures in which youth in rural Australia had less, school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital, have a positive association with higher education aspirations. Hence, it was suggested that despite having more social capital overall than their urban counterparts, youth in rural Australia experience less social capital that is positively associated with higher education.

Overall, the findings indicate that the relationship between geography and social capital is complex and raises the question of which forms of social capital matter for higher education aspirations. In other words, which social capital measures are positively or negatively associated with higher education aspirations and does school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital matter more than peer influence, participation in sports, participation in school-based activities, and volunteering social capital for youth in relation to higher education aspirations? This is the focus of my next study Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis.

CHAPTER 4: GEOGRAPHY, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND HIGHER EDUCATION ASPIRATIONS: A MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Introduction

Youth in rural Australia are less likely to apply for higher education compared to their urban counterparts, resulting in lower rates of attainment (Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2018). This persistent disparity between higher education outcomes for youth in rural Australia and their urban counterparts has been an ongoing concern for the government and policymakers. Critically, it is argued that a key factor contributing to these lower application rates for youth in rural areas is a lower likelihood to aspire to higher education compared to their urban counterparts (Bradley et al., 2008; Halsey, 2018).

Additionally, as has been discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital) the concept of social capital has gained attention as a means of explaining and mediating disparities in higher education outcomes for youth experiencing disadvantage, including for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and more recently for youth in rural areas. This interest is largely due to studies that document the positive influence of social capital on educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Dika & Singh, 2002; Semo & Karmel, 2011; Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Lin, 2001; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

However, there is less empirical evidence exploring the role of social capital in higher education aspirations, which is one of the most important predictors of youths' higher education attainment. Despite much research implying social capital is a critical mechanism explaining differences in post-school aspirations for youth in rural areas, little empirical evidence exists for this claim (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012; Ali & McWhirter, 2006). Further, there is even less empirical evidence of the

importance of social capital in mediating higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. As such, this study investigates the role of social capital in the relationship between geographic location and higher education aspirations.

The current study builds on the findings from my first quantitative study presented in Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital. The current research takes the form of a quantitative study using a large-scale dataset (Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth 2003) to explore the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in urban and rural Australia and investigate whether social capital serves as a mediating factor in this relationship. Specifically, this study aims to quantify differences in higher education aspirations for youth in rural and urban Australia and the social capital mediation association.

Geographic Location as a Predictor of Higher Education Aspirations

Youth in rural Australia have persistently lower outcomes in higher education compared to their urban counterparts. Given the pivotal role of aspirations in determining educational outcomes, it prompts the investigation into whether youth in rural Australia have lower higher education aspirations. Moreover, it raises the question of whether geographic location influences higher education aspirations of youth in rural areas.

There is a significant body of literature indicating that a youth's environment, including geography and community context, plays an important role in influencing their opportunities and aspirations for higher education (Fray, Gore, Harris & North, 2020; Cooper Strathdee & Baglin, 2018; Corbett, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Conger & Elder, 1994). Additionally, factors such as socioeconomic status of families have also been found to influence higher education aspirations, both positively and negatively (Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim, 2016; Gale & Parker, 2015).

Further, several factors have been identified as influencing higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas. One factor often highlighted is the broader socioeconomic

status of rural communities. As there is often a significant intersection between rural communities and lower socioeconomic status communities, it has been argued that the local social and cultural networks and values in these lower socioeconomic communities influence higher education aspirations (Fray et al., 2020). Moreover, rural areas typically offer fewer job opportunities that require higher education compared to urban areas. This difference then may influence the perceived relevance of higher education for youth in rural areas compared to their urban peers (Howley, 2006).

Crucially, youth in rural areas often face more limited access to higher education institutions, as well as limited access to highly experienced teachers and diverse subject offerings in secondary school compared to youth in urban areas (Halsey, 2018; Cuervo, 2014). These persistent issues may also influence formation of aspirations for higher education (Cardak, Brett, Barry, McAllister, Bowden, Bahtsevanoglou & Vecci, 2017; Lamb, Glover & Walstab, 2014). In addition, the influence of social networks, including family, peers, and schools, as well as the broader community, has been shown to shape higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas (Cuervo 2016; Dalley-Trim & Alloway 2010; Mills & Gale 2010; Fray et al., 2020; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

However, the evidence regarding higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas is varied. Some studies suggest that youth in rural areas have strong aspirations for higher education, while other research attributes their lower participation rates to inherently lower aspirations, driven by factors such as ties to the community and limited bridging social capital (Corbett & Forsey 2017; Cuervo et al. 2019a; Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Gale & Parker, 2014; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Helpworth, Mc Innis & Stephanou, 1999; Cardak et al., 2017).

Moreover, there is substantial broader literature indicating correlations between different social background factors and higher education aspirations in the general student population, including positive correlations for youth from migrant backgrounds, high

socioeconomic backgrounds and females (Dika & Singh, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2005; White & Gager, 2007; Bradley et al., 2008). As such, when considering the relationship between geographic location and higher education aspirations it becomes important to also consider the role of social background factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, Indigeneity, and socioeconomic status (SES). This consideration raises a key question: Do youth from different social backgrounds in rural Australia have differences in higher education aspirations?

Social Capital as a Potential Mediator of Geographic Location and Higher Education Aspirations

Having outlined potential factors and influences of geographic location on higher education aspirations of youth in rural areas, it is within this context that the concept of social capital emerges as a potential mediator. As previously discussed, social capital has gained interest in recent years as a potential mechanism to mediate disparities in rural-urban education and higher education outcomes. In particular, through the use of social capital interventions designed to increase higher education aspirations (Curtis, Drummond, Halsey, & Lawson, 2012; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Byun et al., 2012; Kilpatrick, Woodroffe, Barnes & Arnott, 2021).

If, as suggested by a substantial body of literature, the influence of social capital positively influences educational outcomes, then this may potentially have important implications for youth in rural areas. In part, this is because youth in rural areas are often thought to be rich in social capital due to the unique structures in rural communities and experience unique forms of social capital, such as close family, peer, and community relationships, compared to urban youth (Beggs et al., 1996; Beasley, 2016; Lowe, 2015).

In my previous study, Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital, I found that youth in rural Australia had higher amounts of social capital overall; however, there were differences in the amounts and types of social capital experienced by youth in rural Australia compared to their urban counterparts.

Critically, youth in urban areas in my study were found to be higher in some forms of social capital which might promote higher education aspirations, while also lower in some forms of social capital which might constrain higher education aspirations.

However, relatively little research has explicitly examined the role and importance of social capital in education aspirations, including higher education aspirations, which are one of the most important predictors of youths' educational attainment (Homel & Ryan, 2014; Halle & Portes, 1973).

Social Capital as Mediator

There is a growing body of literature suggesting that social capital acts as a mediator in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations and outcomes (Barnes, Kilpatrick, Woodroffe, Crawford, Emery, Burns & Noble, 2019; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Byun et al., 2012; Cuervo et al., 2019).

The 2019 study by Barnes et al. adopted a mixed-methods approach, starting with an analysis of national data to identify high-performing rural communities. This was followed by a student survey to gather individual perspectives and culminated in qualitative case studies for an in-depth exploration. The study highlights how social capital, through the influence of family, friends, educators, and community organisations, plays a crucial role in building awareness, aspirations, and providing support for individuals from regional and remote areas to access and succeed in higher education. Key aspects include the importance of community networks for emotional and academic support and the active role of employers in encouraging higher education as a means for career advancement.

Byun et al. (2012) drew on a national survey of high school students in rural areas to investigate the relationship between social capital and educational aspirations of rural youth. The study revealed that social capital can enhance rural youths' educational aspirations, particularly through the influence of parents' and teachers' relationships.

The study by Cuervo et al. (2019) used a survey of 460 students from six government secondary schools in rural Australia, to investigate the impact of social and cultural capital on post-school educational aspirations. The analysis revealed that peer social capital, reflecting friends' aspirations, was positively associated with students' aspirations for higher education. This research suggests that social capital, particularly from peers, could serve as a potential mediator in shaping higher education aspirations for students in rural areas, emphasising the role of social networks in educational aspirations.

Additionally, Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) conducted surveys and interviews in their study to investigate factors, especially the role of family social capital, in shaping youths' future long-term education and work aspirations. Their findings revealed that social capital, both from family and school/community, is vital for youth in rural areas in navigating their post-school transitions, influencing their immediate work and study priorities and long-term aspirations. These studies all emphasise the potential of social capital in rural areas to improve education aspirations and outcomes, including higher education aspirations, for youth in rural areas.

In addition, the broader literature base emphasises the potential of social capital to act as a mediator, highlighting how supportive relationships with peers, family, and community members, have been shown to significantly shape educational aspirations by providing youth with access to valuable social resources (Hampton-Garland, 2009; Hawkins, 2017; Ellison et al., 2014). Moreover, in these rural communities, where opportunities and resources may be more limited compared to urban areas, the value of a supportive community and a well-connected network becomes even more pronounced. The importance of family, peers, and community relationships for youths' educational achievement and post-school outcomes has been well documented (Coleman, 1988; Israel, Beulieu & Hartless, 2001; Crosnoe, 2004).

More specifically, in rural areas where higher education and employment opportunities are limited, the support and mentorship from significant others, such as career advisors and

teachers, have been found to be important. They can help youth not only to understand the benefits of higher education, but also provide information and help navigate post-school pathways (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Cuervo et al., 2019, 2016; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). Moreover, research has shown that youth who are connected positively to their schools and teachers were more likely to have better education outcomes (Semo & Karmel, 2011; Mensah & Koomson, 2020; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Esveld, 2004; Kiuru, Wang, Salmela-Aro, Ahonen & Hirvonen, 2020).

Additionally, organised leisure and extracurricular activities are thought to potentially act as mediator in educational outcomes (Gibbs, Erickson, Dufur & Miles, 2015; Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003). Participation in these activities have been shown to expand youths' networks, thereby providing support, advice, and access to resources that might otherwise be limited for youth in rural areas (Mahoney, Cairns & Farmer, 2003).

Further, involvement in these activities is believed to foster a sense of belonging and develop skills which in turn can positively affect students' educational engagement (Mahoney et al., 2003; Guest & Schneider, 2003; Eccles et al., 2003). Hence, activities such as volunteering, and participation in sports activities have been shown to potentially improve educational aspirations and outcomes. All of which suggest that strong social networks and participation in activities improve education aspirations and outcomes.

In other words, it may be expected that social capital acts as a mediator in the relationship between youth in rural areas and higher education aspirations. However, it is important to recognise that social capital, which may improve outcomes for some individuals or groups, may reduce outcomes for others.

Some Forms of Social Capital May Reduce Higher Education Aspirations for Youth in Rural Areas

Recognising that a person's ability to obtain resources is related to the group a person has membership in, social capital can be understood to have both positive and negative effects

(Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998). Social capital can offer advantages such as family support, social control, and exclusive access to cultural and economic resources (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). However, conversely, being well-connected socially may limit a person's opportunities. In other words, as discussed in Chapter 3, having a strong social network, as is often found for youth in rural areas, might not always lead to positive outcomes; it could, in some cases, bring about constraints or burdens for an individual. Research has shown that strong social networks in a rural communities can reinforce homogeneity and potentially restrict the consideration of higher education by youths if it differs from the local expected norms (Corra, 2015; Klärner & Knabe, 2019; Fabiansson, 2006; Hendrickson, 2012).

In my previous study, I found that youth in rural Australia had higher overall levels of social capital; however, we know that youth in rural Australia have lower higher education outcomes compared to their urban counterparts. Hence, while youth in rural areas have more social capital in four out of the six social capital measures, these measures might not necessarily act as a positive mediating factor. As such, when considering social capital as a likely mechanism in the relationship between geographic location and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia, it is important to recognise not only the quantity but also the different forms of social capital. Consequently, social capital may act as a positive, neutral, or negative mediating factor between geographic location and higher education aspirations.

The relationship between rural status and university aspirations is likely multi-causal. Access to universities and lower schooling resources likely explain some of this. However, there is now considerable evidence that youth in rural areas have different forms of social capital that likely shape their aspirations and influence their decisions and navigation between different post-school options.

Current Study, Gaps and Limitations

Gaps and Limitations

There is little empirical evidence of the importance of social capital in mediating higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. Moreover, many studies exploring higher education aspirations and youth in rural areas tend to be specific to particular rural areas and qualitative in nature, with fewer large-scale quantitative studies providing evidence at the macro-level (Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Turner, 2018).

While these studies contribute important and valuable insights to the literature, their generalisability is constrained by the considerable diversity among rural communities as was found in my systematic review presented in Chapter 5: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review. In light of these considerations, this study draws on a large-scale national dataset (Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth 2003) reporting on over 10,000 high school students across Australia. By providing generalised macro-level data, this study aims to offer empirical data on the role and importance of social capital as a mediating factor in higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

Additionally, much of the research has drawn on a normative conceptualisation of social capital without thoroughly examining its complexity, particularly in the context of explaining education outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). There has been a tendency to view social capital as a universally accessible resource that always produces positive outcomes, as such, only a few studies have used a social capital framework (Dika & Singh, 2002; Adam & Roncevic, 2003). To help address these concerns, I draw on Bourdieu's theory and conceptualisation of social capital as outlined in Chapter 1.

Current Study

Importantly, this study takes a quantitative perspective to further explore the role of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for

youth in rural Australia. Drawing on a large dataset, the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth 2003 (LSAY 2003), this study explores whether social capital mediates the association between geographic location and higher education aspirations. Specifically, the study aims to quantify the mediating effects of social capital. That is, the degree to which social capital may be a mechanism that links geography to differential higher education aspirations. Estimating not only whether social capital is a likely mechanism but also how strong of a mechanism it is will assist in determining both the degree to which interventions should consider social capital and also the degree to which research should explore other factors that may be impactful in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

The previous study, Chapter 4: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital, examined the variations in the quantity and types of social capital experienced by youth in rural and urban Australia. The study revealed that geography served as a predictor of social capital, indicating that youth in rural areas generally had a higher overall amount of social capital compared to their urban counterparts. In the study, youth in rural Australia had higher levels of social capital than their urban counterparts across four out of the six social capital measures examined.

These measures included peer influence, participation in sports, participation in school-based activities, and volunteering social capital. It was hypothesised that these four social capital measures, despite being more prevalent among youth in rural areas, had a neutral or negative association with higher education aspirations. Additionally, it was hypothesised that the two social capital measures in which youth in rural areas had lower amounts (school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital) were positively associated with higher education aspirations.

Hence, it was suggested that despite having a higher overall amount of social capital, youth in rural Australia had a lower amount of social capital that positively influences their

aspirations for higher education. Overall, the findings indicated that social capital was complex. While youth in rural Australia had higher amounts of social capital overall, the specific types of social capital they acquired may not necessarily be conducive to fostering aspirations for higher education.

This current study builds on these findings to take a quantitative perspective to investigate the role and importance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural and urban Australia. This will assist in determining how much of a focus on social capital strategies is helpful in interventions designed to increase higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

Research Hypothesis

I hypothesised that differences in geographic locations contribute to differences in higher education aspirations for youth. Additionally, I hypothesise that social capital mediates the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Research Question 1: Is there a difference in higher education aspirations between youth in rural and urban areas?

Hypotheses 1.1: Youth living in urban areas have higher aspirations for higher education than youth living in rural areas.

Research Question 2: Does social background (socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth and gender) interact with geography to affect the amount of higher education aspirations youth living in rural areas obtain?

Hypothesis 2.1: Girls in rural and urban areas are more likely to aspire to higher education than boys regardless of location. Location differences will be pronounced in girls.

Hypothesis 2.2: Youth from high socioeconomic status are more likely to aspire to higher education than youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds regardless of location. Location differences will be pronounced in youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Hypothesis 2.3: Non-Indigenous youth in rural and urban areas are more likely to aspire to higher education than Indigenous youth regardless of location. Location differences will be pronounced in non-Indigenous youth.

Hypothesis 2.4: Youth born overseas in rural and urban areas are more likely to aspire to higher education than youth born in Australia to Australian parents regardless of location. Location differences will be pronounced in youth born overseas.

Research Question 3: Does social capital act as a mediator for differences in higher education aspirations between youth in rural and urban areas?

Hypotheses 3: Social capital will act as a positive mediating factor between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Hypotheses 3.1: School connectedness social capital will act as a positive mediating factor between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Hypotheses 3.2: Student-teacher relationship social capital will act as a positive mediating factor between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Hypotheses 3.4: Peer influence social capital will act as a negative mediating factor between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Hypotheses 3.5: School based activities social capital will act as a neutral or positive mediating factor between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Hypotheses 3.6: Sports participation social capital will act as a neutral or positive mediating factor between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Methodology

As previously discussed in the Quantitative Methodology and Background Chapter I am using The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth 2003 (LSAY 2003), an extension of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment Survey (PISA) as it provided the best fit possible to the research questions due to its inclusion of specifically constructed social capital measures initially designed and developed for the LSAY 2003 cohort (Semo & Karmel, 2006). My use of archival data was my preferred choice as it allowed me to gain access to large amounts of available reliable data, as opposed to collecting new data which would be time-consuming and susceptible to measurement errors.

Changes from Chapter Three

While the current study uses the same data and the same operationalisation of social capital, I have made a few changes to this study as follows:

1. **Collapsing provincial and remote categories into a single category.** The reason for this is that in the previous study the uncertainty around the remote category was very high despite the analysis being relatively simple. In this chapter, the models are significantly more complex and thus the ability to distinguish between provincial and remote youth significantly diminished. In the interests of retaining sufficient power for the analysis of interest, I have moved to a geographic categorisation of urban versus rural.
2. **Multilevel Models.** In the previous analysis, I accounted for the nested nature of the LSAY data (students nested within schools) by using the survey designers preferred method of replicant weights. In this chapter I will be considering more complex regression and mediation models where replicant weights are significantly more difficult to utilise. As such, in this chapter, I move to the use of multilevel models.

These models have the advantage of being significantly more flexible while still accounting for the nested nature of the data.

3. **Reduced focus on Interactions.** In the previous chapter considerable focus was placed on the interaction between place and other social dimensions to explore an intersectional approach. I still do so here when exploring the association between place and aspirations for example. However, given that the interactions have tended to be small there was not sufficient power to model a moderated-mediation model for the main hypothesis.

Analysis and Modelling

Regression analyses were used to explore the models. The basic model (M1) explored the relationship between geographic location and higher education aspirations (HEA).

$$HEA = \alpha + \beta_1(j)$$

Where, HEA is predicted by the j th category of geographic location (urban is the reference category with provincial and remote the other categories).

Model 2

A second set of models (M2) were similar but included the following covariates to control for: socioeconomic status, sex, country of birth and Indigenous status. Additionally, the interaction effects of the covariates were also explored.

$$HEA_i = \alpha + \beta_1(j) + \beta_{SES} + \beta_{sex} + \beta_{migrant} + \beta_{Indigenous}$$

A third set of models (M3) explored whether social capital had a mediating relationship between higher education aspirations and geographic location.

Model 3: Path a

The influence of the predictor (geographic location) on social capital

$$SC_i = \alpha + \beta_1(j)$$

Where, SC_i is the i th social capital variable and, $\beta_1(j)$ is the estimate of the j th category of geographic location (with urban as the reference category).

Model 3: Path c* (C Prime)

The influence of predictor on outcome controlling for mediator (total effect)

$$HEA = \alpha + \beta_1(j) + \beta SC_i$$

Where $\beta_1(j)$ is the estimate of the j th category of geographic location (with urban as the reference category) and βSC is the estimate for the influence of the i th social capital variable.

Model 3: Path b

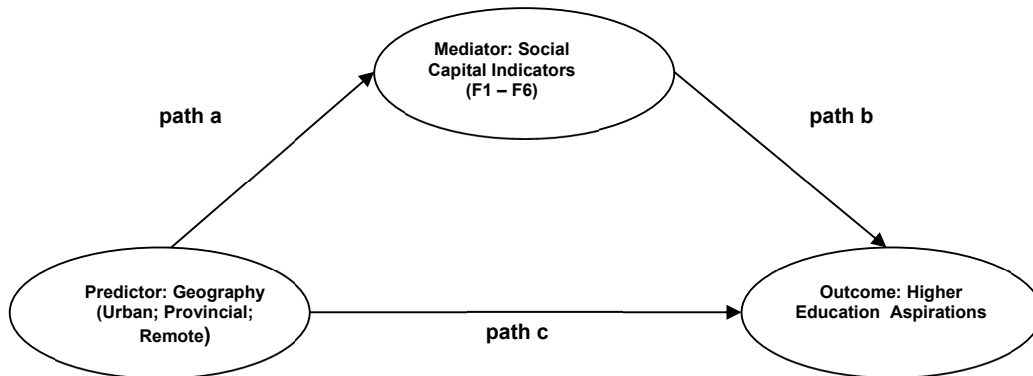
The influence of the mediator on the outcome.

$$HEA = \alpha + \beta SC_i$$

Where βSC is the estimate for the influence of the i th social capital variable.

Figure 4.3

Mediation Model: Total, Direct and Indirect Effects



Results

Youth Living in Rural and Urban Areas Differ in Higher Education Aspirations (Path C)

A multilevel logistic regression model (Model 1) was used to examine the relationship between geographic location and the probability of aspiring to go to university. Table 4.0

shows there were some significant differences in the probability of aspiring to go to university between youth in provincial, remote, and urban areas. Youth in provincial and remote areas were found to have significantly lower probability of aspiring to higher education than youth in urban areas (see Figure 4.0 for marginal effects). These differences indicate a strong relationship between rural status and higher education aspirations.

Table 4.0

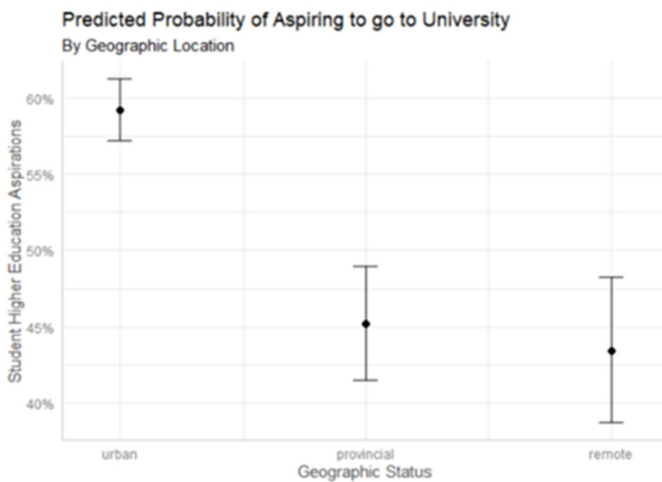
Location Differences in Higher Education Aspirations

Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education
Urban (Comparison Category)	0.313 [0.266, 0.359]***
Provincial difference from Urban	-0.519 [-0.606, -0.432]***
Remote difference from Urban	-0.670 [-0.942, -0.403]***

Note: '****' p< 001; '***' p=.01; '**' p=.05

Figure 4.0

Marginal Effects Geographic Location



Research Question 2: Location Predicting Aspirations in the Context of other Demographics.

I next introduced additional demographics (Indigenous status, gender, country of birth, and socioeconomic status) to further understand the relationship between rural status,

background demographics and higher education aspirations. In addition, I added interactions between the demographic variables (see Table 4.1). I discuss the results in turn.

Below I summarise the results in Table 4.1 in which additional demographic variables are introduced into the model. Before exploring each demographic variable in turn however, I summarise the difference between youth in urban and rural locations when controlling for other demographics. The goal here is to see if rural status predicts higher education aspirations for youth from similar backgrounds. It is important to note however, that the causal precedents here is unclear. For example, it is unclear if families in rural locations are on average poorer because poorer families move to rural locations (i.e., SES causes rural status) or because a loss of jobs in rural locations has led rural families to be poorer (i.e., rural status causes SES).

The analysis of demographic factors in relation to higher education aspirations reveals significant disparities across different groups. Geographic location plays a crucial role, with students in urban areas more likely to aspire to higher education than those in provincial and remote areas.

Gender differences are also evident, with female students showing a slightly higher probability of aspiring higher education compared to male students. Further, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have a much higher likelihood of aspiring to higher education than students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, Indigenous students were found to be less likely to aspire to higher education compared to non-Indigenous students, and youth born in Australia to Australian-born parents are significantly less likely to aspire to higher education than their migrant peers.

In summary, there was a large and statistically significant difference between youth in remote and provincial areas, and youth in urban areas even when controlling for a range of other demographic factors. Youth in rural areas are less likely to aspire to higher education

even when controlling for baseline demographics. This demonstrates that geography, and the category of rural, is a social and cultural location not just geographical.

Summary of Interactions

I then took an intersectional approach to understand if social background (socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth and gender) interacted with geography to affect the likelihood of aspiring to higher education for youth living in rural areas. There was no significant interaction between rural status and SES or between rural status and migrant status (country of birth).

There was a significant interaction between provincial status and Indigenous status. This interaction implies that geographic differences in university aspirations are larger for non-Indigenous youth (see Figure 4.1, Table 4.1). This meant that the gap between Indigenous youth and non-Indigenous youth in the likelihood of aspiring to go to university was considerably bigger in urban areas but narrowed in provincial and remote areas as non-Indigenous aspirations declined in these geographic areas.

Additionally, there was a significant interaction between provincial status and gender. This interaction implies that geographic differences are larger for boys than girls such that the gender gap in university aspirations was larger in provincial and remote areas (see Figure 4.2, Table 4.1). Table 4.1 summarises geographic differences with and without controls. In total, however, the interactions effects were generally small. For this reason, I chose not to continue with an intersectional approach to explore the mediating role of social capital (where the previous study showed interaction effects were small there also). My rationale for this was that an intersectional approach would require a moderated mediation approach. Such models require considerable power to detect differential mediation effects. Even with the large sample I had access to, I was unlikely to be sufficiently powered to detect such relationships given the small interaction associations noted in models M2. Findings from such an underpowered model might imply differential mechanisms for, for example, rural boys and girls are not

present which could be misleading. I explore the potential limitations of a quantitative approach to intersectionality in the discussion.

Table 4.1

Location Differences in Higher Education Aspirations Moderated by Demographic Variables (Intersectional Analysis)

Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education				
	<i>Location Differences Controlling for other Demographics</i>	<i>Indigenous by Location Interaction</i>	<i>Gender by Location Interaction</i>	<i>Migrant Status by Location Interaction</i>	<i>Socioeconomic status by Location interaction</i>
Urban (Comparison Category)	0.313 [0.266, 0.359]***	-0.633 [-0.866, -0.405]***	0.086 [0.021, 0.15]**	0.804 [0.670, 0.941]***	0.115 [0.064, 0.167]***
Provincial difference from Urban	-0.519 [-0.606, -0.432]***	-0.098 [-0.455, 0.256]	-0.672 [-0.801, -0.544]***	-0.699 [-1.09, -0.305]***	-0.372 [-0.456, -0.279]***
Remote difference from Urban	-0.670 [-0.942, -0.403]***	-0.512 [-1.47, 0.323]	-0.918 [-1.37, -0.495]***	-1.620 [-2.93, -0.485]**	-0.595 [-0.893, -0.306]***
Gender	0.085 [0.021, 0.150]**	0.469 [0.375, 0.562]***	0.469 [0.375, 0.562]***	0.571 [0.428, 0.716]	0.671 [0.609, 0.734]***
SES	0.715 [0.660, 0.770]***	0.711 [0.470, 0.957]***	0.502 [0.404, 0.599]***	0.719 [0.664, 0.775]***	0.659 [0.598, 0.721]***
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.794 [-0.938, -0.652]***	-0.653 [-0.800, -0.507]***	-0.653 [-0.800, -0.507]***	-0.653, [-0.800, -0.507]***	-0.793 [-0.937, -0.651]***
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	-0.020 [-0.216, 0.175]	0.081 [-0.117, 0.028]	0.081 [-0.117, 0.280]	0.081 [-0.117, 0.280]	-0.020 [-0.216, 0.175]
Indigenous	-0.633 [-0.866, -0.405]***	0.989 [0.756, 1.23]***	0.475 [0.381, 0.570]***	0.454 [0.268, 0.644]***	0.640 [0.578, 0.702]***
Indigenous – non-Indigenous by Provincial		-0.418 [-0.783, -0.05] *			
Indigenous – non-Indigenous by Remote		-0.099 [-0.984, 0.893]			
Gender by Provincial			0.244 [0.066, 0.422]**		
Gender by Remote			0.348 [-0.206, 0.917]		
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Provincial				0.321 [-0.084, 0.724]	
Migrant Status: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote				1.08 [-0.085, 2.42]	
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to				0.061 [-0.561, 0.687]	

Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education				
	<i>Location Differences Controlling for other Demographics</i>	<i>Indigenous by Location Interaction</i>	<i>Gender by Location Interaction</i>	<i>Migrant Status by Location Interaction</i>	<i>Socioeconomic status by Location interaction</i>
Australian born parents by Provincial					
Migrant Status: Born Overseas compared to youth born in Australia to Australian born parents by Remote				1.13 [-0.400, 2.80]	
SES by Provincial					0.064 [-0.057, 0.187]
SES by Remote					0.166 [-0.222, 0.584]

Note: ****' p< 001; ***' p=.01; '**' p=.05;

Figure 4.1

Marginal Effects: Indigenous Status

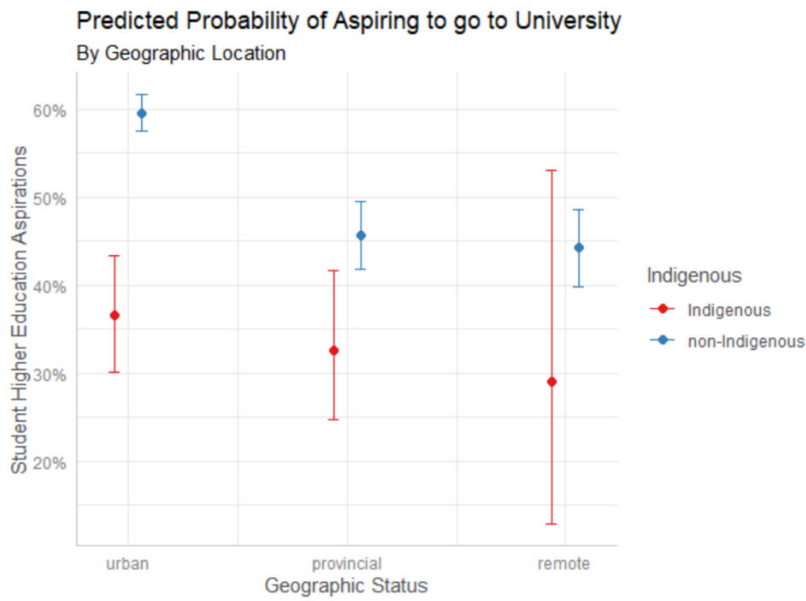
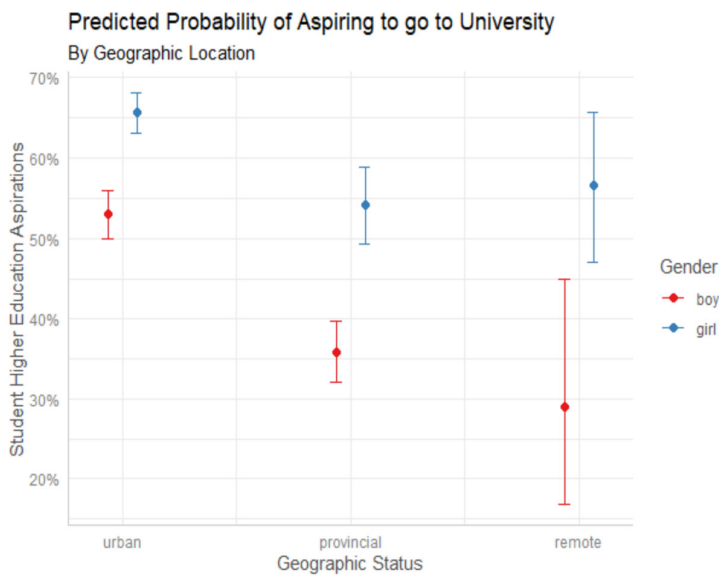


Figure 4.2

Marginal Effects: Gender Status



Mediation Association: The Relationship between Rural Status and Social Capital (Path A)

In the previous study ‘Differential effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths’ Social Capital’ it was found that there is a relationship between rural

status and social capital. Overall, differences were found in the amount and type of social capital between youth in rural and urban Australia. Youth in rural locations had higher social capital than youth in urban locations in four of the social capital measures; peer influence, participation in sports, participation in school-based activities and volunteering. Youth in urban locations had higher social capital than youth in rural locations in only two social capital measures: student connectedness to school and student-teacher relationships. I do not report the results for this part of the mediation again here, but they are available in Chapter 3 (the previous chapter).

Mediation Association of Social Capital and Higher Education Aspirations for Youth in Rural and Urban Locations

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating role of social capital on the association between geography and higher education aspirations. The aim was to test if social capital had associations with location and higher education aspirations consistent with a mediation hypothesis. Specifically, these models will test to see if evidence is consistent with social capital as a likely mechanism in explaining the link between location and university aspirations but also how strong of a mechanism it might be.

The comparison is made between youth in urban locations and the combined group of youth in provincial and remote areas. The decision to compare youth in urban locations to the combined group of youth in provincial and remote areas was based on the limited number of students in remote locations. Grouping provincial and remote together enhances the statistical power required to run the mediation model effectively.

Models were estimated for each social capital factor (school connectedness; student-teacher relationship; sport participation; peer influence; school activities participation) and measured the total, direct and indirect effects to attempt to better understand the association between geography (urban and provincial), social capital and higher education aspirations. In other words, the analysis attempted to unravel how much higher education aspiration

outcomes are because of social capital effects and how much are because of geography effects. The mediation analysis comprised two sets of regression: a) a model with location (controlling for other demographics) predicting social capital; and b) location (controlling for other demographics) and social capital predicting university aspirations. Direct, indirect, and total mediation associations were estimated, via bootstrapping with resampling of the dataset 1000 times. These bootstraps also accounted for the multilevel nature of the data. It is important to note that this analysis reflects associations rather than causal relationships, and further research would be required to establish causality.

The Effects of Social Capital on Higher Education Aspirations

A multilevel logistic regression model was performed to examine the relationship between geography, social capital and the probability of aspiring to higher education. An analysis was completed for each social capital factor (school connectedness; student-teacher relationship; sport participation; peer influence; school activities participation) to attempt to better understand the association between changes in amounts of social capital on changes in the probability of aspiring to higher education. I report the results for each social capital variable in turn in the sections below.

School Connectedness Social Capital

Table 4.2 shows that school connectedness social capital is positively associated with higher education aspirations when controlling for geography. Figure 4.4 shows the difference in predicted probabilities between students two standard deviations below and above the mean of school connectedness social capital is approximately 5 percentage points. This indicates a substantial effect, highlighting the importance of school connectedness social capital in influencing higher education aspirations.

When accounting for the school social capital in the association between geography and university aspirations (see Table 4.3 and 4.4), the results indicated a strong association between urban location and higher education aspirations. Specifically, being in an urban

location was associated with a higher probability of aspiring to higher education compared to rural locations. This indicates that social capital alone is not the only mechanisms in explaining geographic differences. School social capital was a significant predictor however suggesting a mediation association may exist.

The results of the mediation association of school connectedness social capital and higher education aspirations in Table 4.17 reveal a significant indirect effect of geography, mediated by school social capital on higher education aspirations. The proportion mediated was approximately 1.9% of the total effect of geography (urban and rural) on higher education aspirations. These findings indicate that while there is a significant mediating effect, it is relatively small in size (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.4

Marginal Effects: School Connectedness Social Capital

Predicted Probability of Student Aspiration

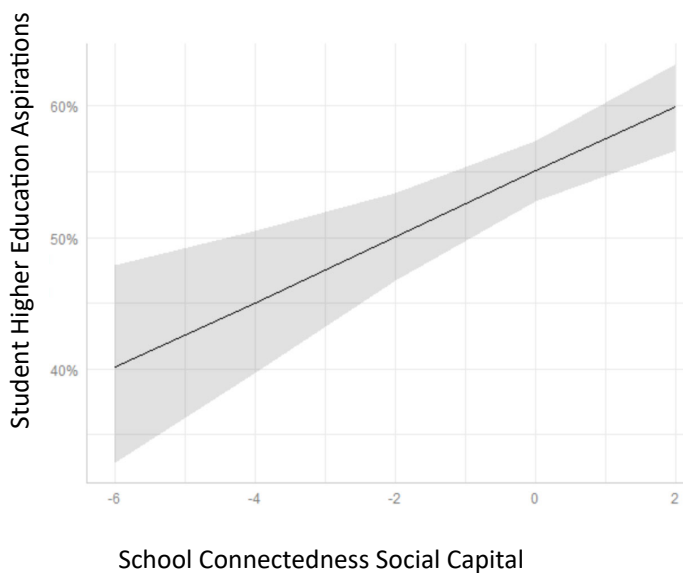


Table 4.2*Social Capital Effects on Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education (Path B)*

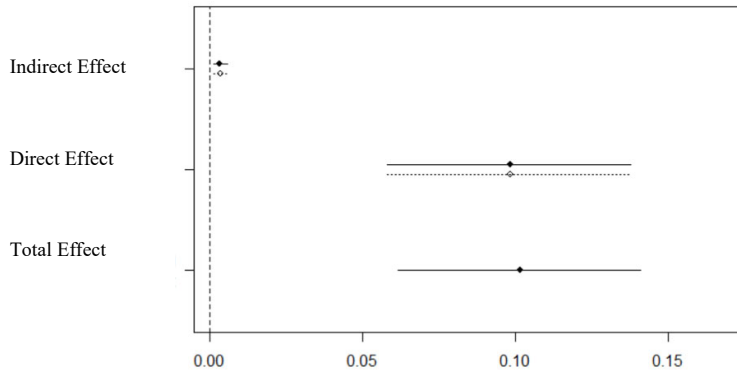
Location	<i>Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Intercept	0.219 [0.172, 0.267]
School Connectedness Social Capital	0.110 [0.063, 0.157]

Table 4.3*Location Differences in Social Capital Effects*

Location	<i>Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Intercept	-0.114 [-0.200, -0.028]
Urban	0.477 [0.374, 0.580]
School Connectedness Social Capital	0.101 [0.054, 0.149]

Table 4.4*Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education*

Location	<i>Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Provincial and Remote	0.47 [0.45, 0.49]
Urban	0.59 [0.58, 0.60]

Figure 4.9*School Connectedness Mediation Effects on Higher Education Aspirations***Table 4.17***Mediation Analysis*

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Total Effect (Path c)	0.102	0.063	0.14	<.001***
Indirect Effect (Path a*b)	0.002	0.001	0.00	<.002**
Direct Effect (Path c* PRIME)	0.100	0.060	0.14	<.001***
Prop. Mediated	0.019	0.007	0.04	<.002**

Note. Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Student-Teacher Relationship Social Capital

Table 4.5 shows that student-teacher relationship social capital is strongly associated with higher education aspirations when controlling for geography. For each unit increase in student-teacher relationship social capital, there was a significant increase in the log-odds of aspiring to higher education. Figure 4.5 shows the observed association between student-teacher relationship social capital and higher education aspirations (the full observed range of the student-teacher social capital variable is shown).

When adding this social capital variable into a model of the relationship between geographic location and aspirations (see Table 4.6), the results still indicated a strong association between urban location and higher education aspirations. Specifically, being in an urban location was associated with a higher probability of aspiring to higher education compared to rural locations (Table 4.7). These findings suggest that student-teacher social capital is not a complete mediator of the association between geography and university aspirations. However, a significant relationship between student-teacher social capital and aspirations implying some level of mediation was still possible.

The results of mediation association of student-teacher relationship social capital and higher education aspirations in Table 4.18 indicate there is a significant strong direct effect of geography on higher education aspirations. The analysis also suggests that student-teacher relationship social capital does not mediate the relationship between geographic location and higher education aspirations, as the indirect effect was not significant.

Figure 4.5

Marginal Effects: Student-Teacher Relationship Social Capital

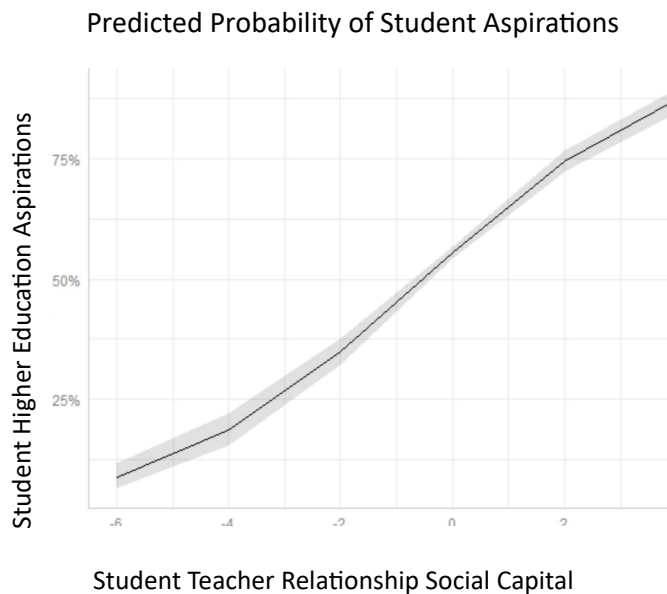


Table 4.5*Social Capital Effects on Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education (Path B)*

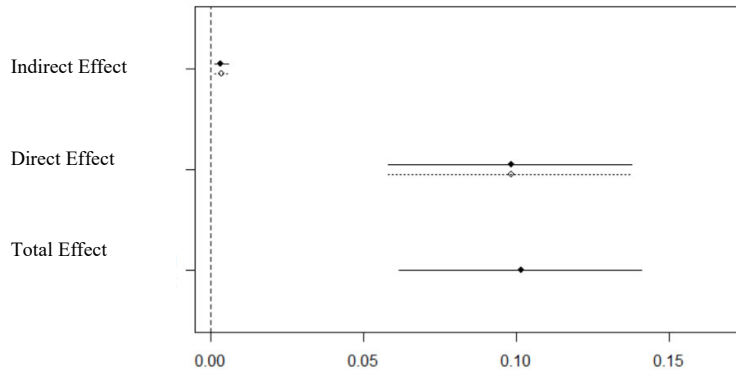
Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education
Intercept	0.222 [0.174, 0.270]
Student-Teacher Relationship Social Capital	0.424 [0.372, 0.477]

Table 4.6*Location Differences of Social Capital Effects*

Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education
Intercept	-0.108 [-0.196, -0.021]
Urban	0.472 [0.367, 0.577]
Student-Teacher Relationship Social Capital	0.420 [0.368, 0.474]

Table 4.7*Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education*

Location	Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education
Provincial and Remote	0.47 [0.45, 0.49]
Urban	0.59 [0.58, 0.60]

Figure 4.10*Mediation Analysis: Student-Teacher Relationships***Table 4.18***Mediation Analysis*

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Total Effect (Path c)	0.101	0.062	0.14	<.001***
Indirect Effect (Path a*b)	0.006	-0.001	0.01	0.068
Direct Effect (Path c* PRIME)	0.095	0.055	0.13	<.001***
Prop. Mediated	0.058	-0.006	0.14	0.068

Note. signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 7033

Simulations: 1000

Peer Influence Social Capital

Table 4.8 shows that peer influence social capital is negatively associated with higher education aspirations when controlling for geography. For each unit increase of peer influence social capital, there was a significant decrease in the log-odds of aspiring to higher education. Figure 4.6 shows the negative association, highlighting that an increase in peer influence social capital is strongly associated with a lower likelihood of aspiring to higher education (the full range of the observed values for peer influence social capital is shown).

When accounting for peer influence social capital, geographic location (Table 4.9), still had a strong association between urban location and higher education aspirations (Table 4.9 and 4.10). Specifically, being in an urban location was associated with a higher probability of aspiring to higher education compared to rural locations. This implies that peer-influence social capital cannot be the only mechanism in explaining the association between geography and university aspirations. Yet the results show that the negative association between peer influence social capital and higher education aspirations was significant. This implies that mediation was still a possibility.

The results of mediation association of peer influence social capital and higher education aspirations in Table 5.19 reveal a significant indirect effect of geography, mediated by peer influence social capital on higher education aspirations. The total effect of geography on higher education was significant indicating there is a strong association between geography and higher education aspirations. The proportion of this association mediated by peer-influence social capital was approximately 3.2%. These findings indicate that while there is a statistically significant mediating effect, it is relatively small in size (Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6

Marginal Effects: Peer Influence Social Capital

Predicted Probability of Student Aspirations

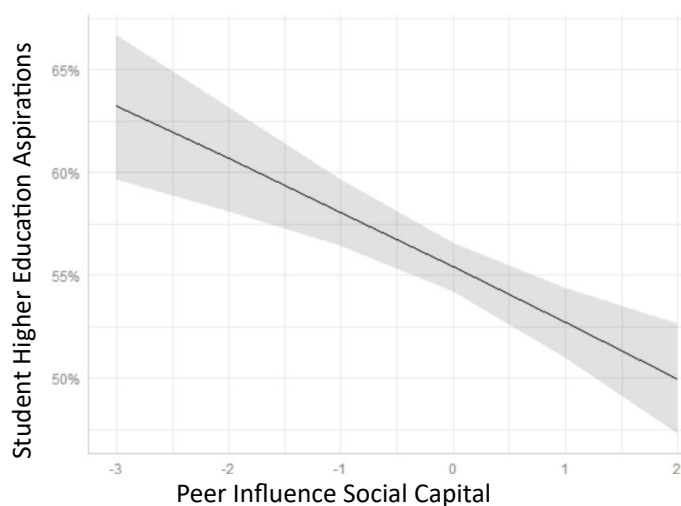


Table 4.8*Social Capital Effects on Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education (Path B)*

Location	<i>Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Intercept	0.217 [0.170, 0.264]
Peer Influence Social Capital	-0.109 [-0.156, -0.061]

Table 4.9*Location Differences of Social Capital Effects*

Location	<i>Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Intercept	-0.115 [-0.201, -0.029]
Urban	0.475 [0.372, 0.578]
Peer Influence Social Capital	-0.097 [-0.145, -0.049]

Table 4.10*Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education*

Location	<i>Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Provincial and Remote	0.47 [0.45, 0.49]
Urban	0.59 [0.58, 0.60]

Table 4.19

Mediation Analysis

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Total Effect (Path c)	0.101	0.062	0.14	<.001***
Indirect Effect (Path a*b)	0.003	0.001	0.01	<.001***
Direct Effect (Path c* PRIME)	0.099	0.058	0.14	<.001***
Prop. Mediated	0.032	0.012	0.07	<.001***

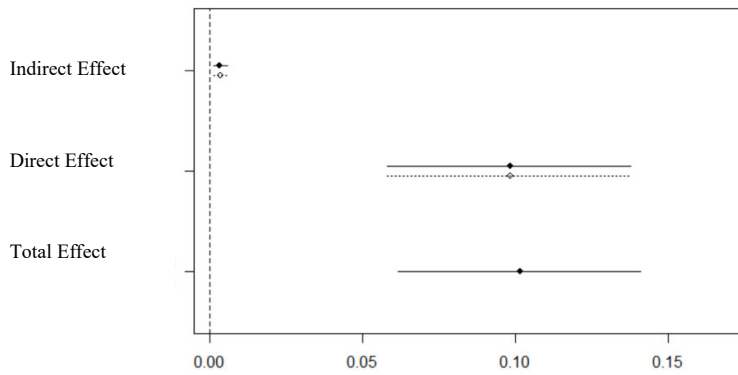
Note. Signif. Codes: 0 '****' 0.001 '***' 0.01 '**' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 7033

Simulations: 1000

Figure 4.11

Mediation Analysis: Peer Influence Social Capital



Participation in School-Based Activities Social Capital

Table 4.11 shows that participation in school-based activities social capital is positively associated with higher education aspirations when controlling for geography. For each unit increase in school-based activities social capital, there was a significant increase in the log-odds of aspiring to higher education. Figure 4.7 shows a strong association between school activities social capital and higher education aspirations (the full observed range of school-based activities social capital is shown).

When adding this social capital variable into a model of the relationship between geographic location and aspirations (see table 4.12), the results still indicated a strong association between urban location and higher education aspirations. Specifically, being in an urban location was associated with a higher probability of aspiring to higher education compared to rural locations (Table 4.13). This association implies that school-based activities social capital is not a complete mediator of the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. However, a significant association between school-based activities and aspirations was present implying some level of mediation was still possible.

The results of mediation association of school-based activities social capital and higher education aspirations in Table 4. 20 indicate there is a significant strong direct effect of geography on higher education aspirations but the indirect effect via school-based activities social capital was not statistically significant. Thus, the analysis suggests that school-based social capital does not mediate the relationship between geographic location and higher education aspirations.

Figure 4.7

Marginal Effects: School-Based Activities Social Capital
Predicted Probability of Student Aspirations

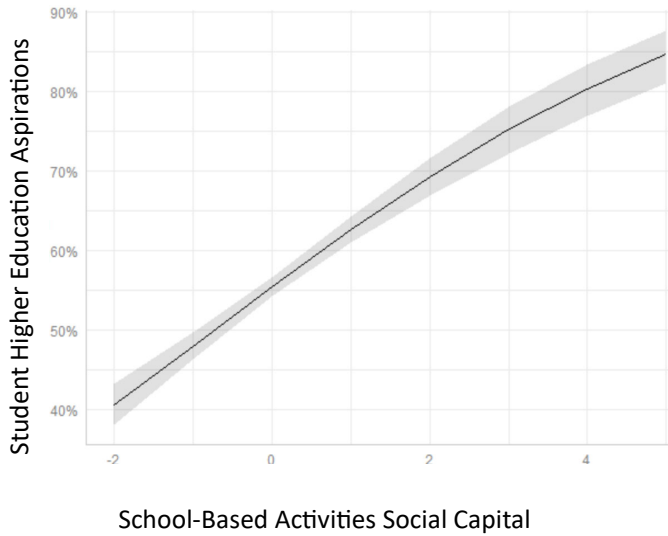


Table 4.11

Social Capital Effects on Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education (Path B)

Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education
Intercept	0.218 [0.170, 0.265]
School Activities Social Capital	0.298 [0.249, 0.347]

Table 4.12

Location Differences of Social Capital Effects

Location	Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education
Intercept	-0.120 [-0.207, -0.033]
Urban	0.484 [0.380, 0.588]
School Activities Social Capital	0.297 [0.247, 0.347]

Table 4.13*Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education*

Location	Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education
Provincial and Remote	0.47 [0.45, 0.49]
Urban	0.59 [0.58, 0.60]

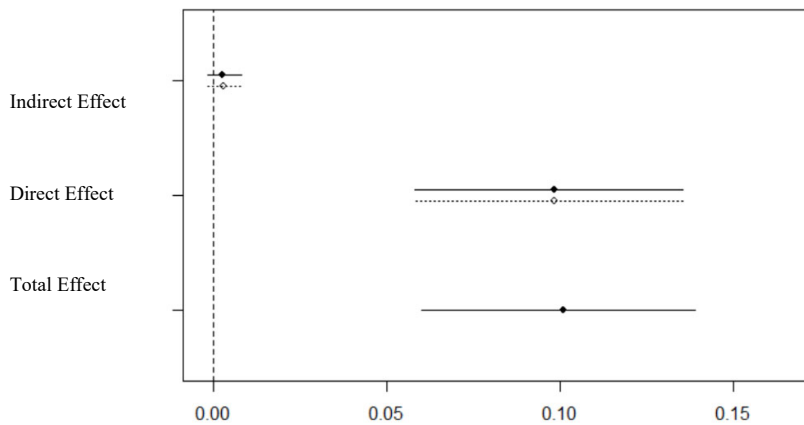
Table 4.20*Mediation Analysis*

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Total Effect (Path c)	0.101	0.060	0.14	<.001***
Indirect Effect (Path a*b)	0.003	-0.002	0.01	0.26
Direct Effect (Path c* PRIME)	0.100	0.060	0.14	<.001***
Prop. Mediated	0.025	-0.019	0.08	0.26

Note. Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 7033

Simulations: 1000

Figure 4.12*Causal Mediation Analysis: Participation in School Based Activities Social Capital*

Participation in Sports Activities Social Capital

Table 4.14 show that for participation in sports social capital there is no significant association with higher education aspirations (Figure 4.8; full range of observed values for sports activities social capital shown). As such, a statistically significant mediating association was unlikely.

When accounting for sports participation social capital, geographic location (Table 4.15), still had a strong association between urban location and higher education aspirations (Table 4.15 and 4.16). Specifically, being in an urban location was associated with a higher probability of aspiring to higher education compared to rural locations.

As expected, the results of mediation association of sports activities social capital and higher education aspirations in Table 4.21 indicate there was not a statistically significant indirect effect for sports activities social capital in the association between geography and university aspirations.

Figure 4.8

Marginal Effects: Sports Activities Social Capital

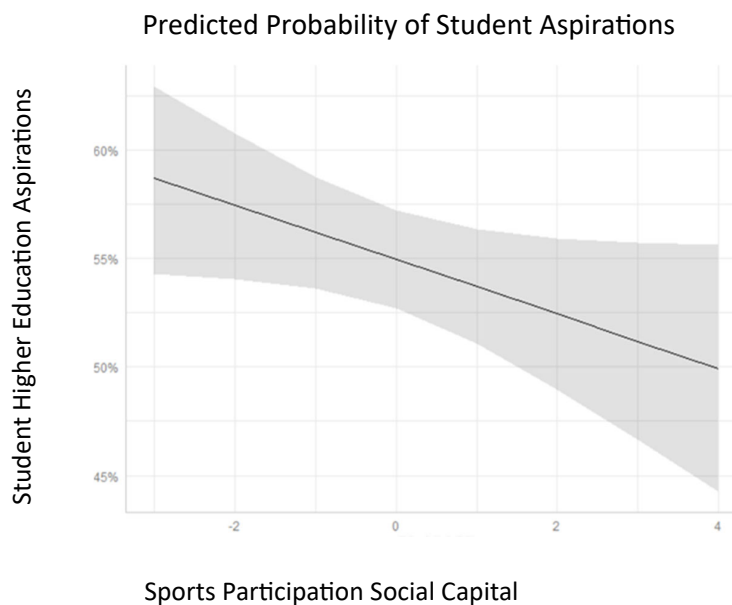


Table 4.14*Social Capital Effects on Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education (Path B)*

Location	<i>Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Intercept	0.218 [0.171, 0.265]
Sports Activities Social Capital	-0.006 [-0.053, 0.041]

Table 4.15*Location Differences of Social Capital Effects*

Location	<i>Log Likelihood to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Intercept	-0.122 [-0.208, -0.036]
Urban	0.486 [0.383, 0.589]
Sports Activities Social Capital	-0.011 [-0.059, 0.037]

Table 4.16*Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education*

Location	<i>Predicted Probability to Aspire to Higher Education</i>
Provincial and Remote	0.47 [0.45, 0.49]
Urban	0.59 [0.58, 0.60]

Table 4.21*Mediation Analysis*

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Total Effect (Path c)	0.102	0.060	0.15	<.001***
Indirect Effect (Path a*b)	0.000	-0.000	0.00	0.57
Direct Effect (Path c* PRIME)	0.102	0.061	0.14	<.001***
Prop. Mediated	0.001	-0.004	0.01	0.57

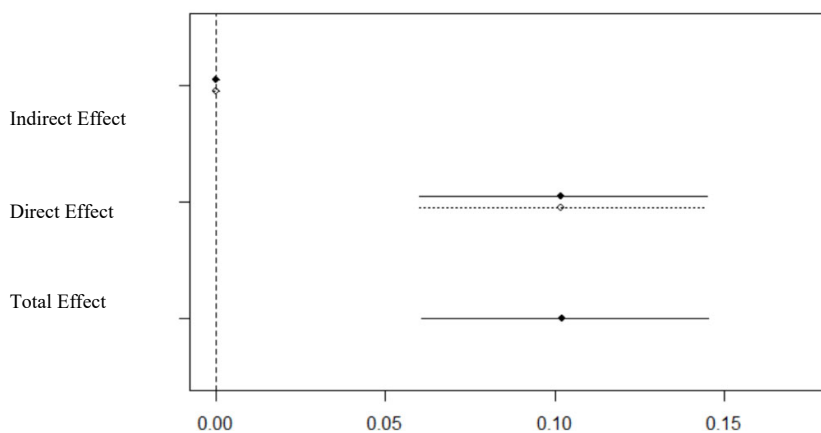
Note. Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 7033

Simulations: 1000

Figure 4.13

Causal Mediation Analysis: Participation in Sports Activities Social Capital



Summary of Hypothesis 2 Results

Mediation Analysis

The results across social capital indicators (school connectedness, student-teacher relationship, peer influence, school-based activities, sports participation) revealed several significant indirect effects of geography on higher education aspirations. However, routinely the percentage of the association between geography and university aspirations was small.

This showed that social capital may partially mediate the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, yet the size of this mediation was substantially smaller than the remaining direct effect indicating other factors are likely also important. I turn to what these additional factors may be in Chapter 6: General Discussion and Conclusion.

Discussion

This study took a quantitative perspective to further explore the significance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. Specifically, this study explored the differences in higher education aspirations between youth in rural and urban Australia, examined the effects of different forms of social capital on the predicted probability to aspire to higher education, and estimated the mediation association of social capital as a mechanism that links geography to differential higher education aspirations.

Disparities in Higher Education Aspirations

In general, disparities in higher education aspirations were found between youth in rural and urban Australia. Youth in rural areas demonstrated a significantly lower likelihood to aspire to higher education compared to their urban counterparts. Overall, this study revealed a strong relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, even when accounting for a range of demographic factors. Hence, these findings highlight the significance of geography, and the structure of rural, as not only a physical location but also a social and cultural location that influences and shapes youths' aspirations. Additionally, two interactions were found between Indigenous status and males however these were very small in nature.

There is varying evidence in the literature on higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas. As previously discussed, some research indicates that youth in rural areas have strong aspirations for higher education, whilst other research indicates that youth in rural

areas have lower aspirations compared to their urban counterparts (Tieken, 2016; Howley, 2006; Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; James et al., 2004; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hu, 2003; Bejema, Miller & Williams, 2002; Atherton, Cymbir, Roberts, Page & Remedios, 2009). My findings seemed to support the literature that youth in rural areas are less likely to aspire to higher education than their urban counterparts.

Additionally, my findings differed to some literature which contends that differences between youth in rural and urban Australia are less than those between different socioeconomic groups, and that educational disadvantage of youth in rural areas is mainly due to socioeconomic factors rather than geographical location (Curtis et al., 2012; James, 2001; Williams, Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1993). My results found that geographic location plays a crucial role in predicting higher education aspirations, with youth in urban areas significantly more likely to aspire to higher education than those in provincial and remote areas. However, differences were also evident for socioeconomic status, with youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds much more likely to aspire to higher education than youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Social Capital and Higher Education Aspirations

When examining the association between different social capital measures and the predicted probability of aspiring to higher education I found that both school connectedness social capital and student-teacher relationship social capital were strongly associated with higher education aspirations. Both forms of social capital had a substantial positive association with higher education aspirations. Coupled with the higher probability to aspire to higher education for youth in urban locations when compared to youth in rural locations, the results suggested that the presence of school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital would enhance their higher education aspirations further in urban locations.

Further, school-based activities social capital had a positive association with higher education aspirations, however to a lesser degree than school connectedness and student

teacher social capital. These findings support and extend the dialogue established by research suggesting the school-related social capital is important for better educational aspirations and outcomes (Kiuru et al., 2020; Semo & Karmel, 2011; Byun et al., 2012; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Ellison et al., 2014; Esveld, 2004). Interestingly, while many studies indicate that sports participation is helpful to improve education aspirations and outcomes, my study found sports social capital to have a fairly neutral association (Tonts, 2005; Atherley, 2006; Spaaij, 2009).

In contrast, peer influence social capital was found to have a moderate negative association with higher education aspirations. This result aligns with existing research which suggests strong social ties to peers and family can constrain higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas (Corra, 2015; Klärner & Knabe, 2019; Fabiansson, 2006; Corra, 2015; Corbett, 2007; Beasley, 2016; Hendrickson, 2012).

In the previous study, the complexity of social capital was evident. As such, it was hypothesised that although youth in rural areas were found to have more social capital overall, it may not necessarily translate into a higher likelihood of aspiring to higher education compared to youth from urban Australia. This hypothesis was based on the findings that youth in rural Australia experience less of certain types of social capital, such as school connectedness and student-teacher relationship social capital, which were hypothesised to be positively associated with higher education aspirations, while simultaneously having more of other types of social capital, such as peer influence social capital, which may have negative implications for higher education aspirations. This was tested formally with a multilevel mediation model.

Mediation Findings

Building on these findings, this study estimated whether social capital was a statistically significant mediator in the association between geography and higher education aspirations, as well as the strength of that mediation. This analysis aimed to assist in determining both the degree to which interventions should consider social capital, and the

degree to which research should explore other likely factors in the association between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

This study found a strong direct association between geography and higher education aspirations across all the analysis. School connectedness social capital and peer influence social capital played a statistically significant role in partially mediating this association. These results suggest the potentially positive role of school connectedness social capital and the potentially negative role of peer influence social capital in shaping higher education aspirations. Further, whilst student-teacher relationship social capital may not have shown statistical significance in mediating the association between geographic location and higher education aspirations, it is still a notable result and could potentially also hold some practical significance in real-world contexts.

However, it is important to note that establishing causal inference would require further analysis. While the findings are consistent with social capital potentially playing a role in shaping higher education aspirations, there are other explanations which must be considered (as discussed in Chapter 3). For example, some forms of social capital, such as professional networks or family connections, are associated with greater resources, such as income (Bourdieu, 1986).

Importance of Social Capital: Small Partial Mediation

Whilst social capital was shown to partially mediate all these associations, the size of this mediation was relatively small, substantially less than expected. The proportion mediated was only approximately 1.9% of the total effect of geography (urban and rural) on higher education aspirations. As previously mentioned, there is little empirical evidence on the importance of social capital as a mediator in relation to higher education aspirations.

This result, being smaller than expected, stems from drawing on prior research on social capital, particularly in rural contexts. Such research tends to be qualitative and often conducted on a smaller scale, which is invaluable for in-depth exploration. However, these

methodological differences may lead to variations in the perceived impact of social capital. Therefore, incorporating a quantitative approach and drawing on a large-scale data set, this study adds a valuable perspective. Additionally, this result appears to be smaller than those found in some studies that investigated social capital as a mediator, particularly in contexts of school-related and community social capital, on various educational and youth development outcomes (Sun, 1999; Ye, Wen, Wang & Lin, 2020; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Teachman, Pasch & Carver, 1997).

Sports social capital and school-based activities social capital were not statistically significant as a mechanism in the association between geography and higher education aspirations.

These results underscore the complexity of social capital, and from the literature discussed previously on social capital and education, I would have expected the size of this mediation to be larger. These findings potentially contribute to the ongoing dialogue in this area, offering new insights into the role of social capital as a mediator in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. Specifically, in consideration of how much focus should be given to social capital in education interventions and policy in rural areas.

As discussed in Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital, within the context of Bourdieu's theory of social capital, even a small association can have implications in the critical context of education, particularly for youth in rural areas. For example, a slight improvement in student-teacher relationships and school connectedness social capital could lead to enhanced student engagement. This in turn, might result in higher attendance rates, or even subtle increases in academic performance across a broad student base, which could be considered practically significant.

However, given the nuanced and complex nature of social capital, outlined in Chapter 3, effectively increasing social capital that is positively associated with higher education aspirations presents a considerable challenge. This complexity is partly due to the way social capital can be exclusionary to certain groups, such as youth in rural areas, while maintaining privileges for others, such as urban youth and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In other words, for social capital interventions to be effective, they would need to address the underlying rural-urban relationship and the associated power dynamics, emphasising the importance of a social reproduction approach to social capital research and policy development.

Possible Overreliance on Social Capital

Importantly, my findings indicate that higher education aspirations were mainly because of geographic effects, as the indirect associations of social capital never accounted for much of the total association of geography (urban and rural) on higher education aspirations (i.e., less than 5% of the total association). Given the interest in social capital in educational interventions and policy these results are interesting and raise the question of a possible overreliance on social capital to mediate educational disadvantages. Further, the results indicate that other factors are likely also important in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations.

Consequently, there is a need to explore how rural and urban social structures may shape higher education aspirations for youth. Therefore, while social capital remains significant and important, it is essential to explore additional likely factors that may be more impactful and feasible to implement effectively, thereby offering a real choice to aspire to higher education for youth in rural Australia.

While the results of this study do not provide explanations, the literature offers possible explanations. Drawing on the findings presented in the next chapter, Chapter 5: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth

Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review, together with the results presented in this chapter, and Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital, possible explanations and additional likely important factors will be explored in Chapter 6: General Discussion and Conclusion. Specifically, in relation to whether youth in rural Australia perceive higher education to be a real choice.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

The quantitative research in this study drew on a large-scale dataset, which was able to provide generalisable results, allowing for persistent patterns of inequity to be seen in relation to higher education aspirations. The quantitative results provided clear and consistent evidence which makes the disparities difficult to overlook in relation to the lower higher education aspirations of youth in rural Australia.

Additionally, this quantitative research was essential as it was able to quantify how much higher education aspiration outcomes are because of social capital and how much are because of geography in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. These findings would not have been possible with qualitative methods alone and were invaluable to having deeper understandings of the research problem. In particular, drawing attention to the fact that although social capital is of increasing interest to policy makers and educational researchers, as well as finding social capital to be one of the most researched factors in my qualitative systematic review presented in the next chapter, the actual size of the social capital mediation association was found to be substantially smaller than expected. This suggests a possible overreliance on social capital strategies.

This study also has some limitations that should be considered, as well as directions for future research. This study was able to account for several important background factors however, the study was correlational in nature. Further, my results were able to provide some findings on practically and statistically significant interactions to reveal nuance and

complexity. However, it would be useful to do further qualitative, intersectional investigation to fully explore these interactions to understand how social structures and systemic oppressions intersect to shape higher education aspirations and outcomes for youth from different social backgrounds in rural Australia.

Further, in the current quantitative study I worked with urban and rural groupings of students. This is important to be able to provide generalisable results, allowing for persistent patterns of inequity to be seen in relation to higher education aspirations. However, I acknowledge the varied nature and diversity of youth and their rural communities in Australia. It is not my intention to homogenise rural areas, however, it is important to quantitatively examine the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. This is due to the use of social capital and higher education aspirations in discourses that often normalise urban life, while “othering” rural life. A quantitative approach was essential as it provided generalised findings and quantification of the strength and significance of relationships between variables, providing valuable insights about the geographic area and groups of people for which these results were valid. These findings would not be possible with qualitative methods alone.

Conclusion

Building on the findings in Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youth’s Social Capital, this study explored the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. The quantitative results provided clear evidence of a significant disparity in the likelihood to aspire to higher education between youth in rural and urban Australia, with youth in rural Australia significantly less likely to aspire.

Further, social capital measures were found to have positive, neutral, and negative associations with these aspirations and were also found to partially mediate the relationship

between geography and higher education aspirations. However, the size of this mediation was substantially smaller than expected, suggesting a possible overreliance on social capital to increase higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

Notably, the results highlighted that higher education aspiration outcomes were mainly because of geographic effects. Given these insights, it is evident that while social capital is a significant and important factor in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, there are likely other important factors that need consideration. Possible explanations and additional likely important factors will be explored in Chapter 6: General Discussion and Conclusion.

CHAPTER 5: QUALITATIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Title: Effects of Geography on Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Attainment of Youth Living in Rural Areas: A Systematic Review

Abstract

Higher Education attainment is widely recognised as important for youth transitioning into adulthood, providing occupational opportunities and contributing to increased wealth, health and well-being. Notably, a rural-urban higher education divide is prevalent globally. The lower participation rates of youth from rural areas in higher education, combined with lower attainment rates, is a common theme in rural research throughout the world.

Given the role of higher education aspirations in predicting higher educational attainment, I conducted a systematic review of qualitative studies exploring higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment of youth living in rural areas. The objective of this review was to synthesise the large body of rich and diverse qualitative literature to build collective understandings of the issues and phenomena relating to the variability of higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas.

A grounded theory approach was utilised to thematically analyse the findings of 108 selected studies (combined sample size of over 2000 pages of text) and build a collective understanding of the issues and phenomenon identified. The findings are reported in terms of six interrelating key and emerging themes; Place/Rurality; Capital; Social and Structural systems; Identity Development; Globalisation and Political Impacts, and Risk. The collective findings highlighted the complexity of the different variables and influences, within the structure of rural, that impact on youth living in rural areas when they are making post-school decisions in relation to higher education and careers.

A general framework was developed to provide a base for future analysis of qualitative case studies. Further research recommendations include reflexive qualitative research which encompasses and examines how the higher education and occupational aspirations of youth living in rural areas are formed. This research should consider how these aspirations are formed not only within specific geography, community, family and individual factors and influences, but also within the context of globalisation, broader structures (rural-urban relationship), and educational and economic policies and discourses.

Key Words: Systematic Review; Synthesis of qualitative evidence; Educational aspirations and attainment; Youth living in rural areas.

Introduction

Lower participation of youth from regional, rural, and remote¹ communities in higher education, combined with lower attainment rates, is a common theme in rural research throughout the world. In Australia, a youth from a rural community is 40% less likely to attain a higher education qualification than a youth from an urban area (Naphine et al., 2019). The difference in attainment rates between youth in rural and urban areas is a concern as it raises significant social justice issues, including educational inequity and inequitable wealth distribution for those living in rural areas (Halsey, 2018). Furthermore, higher education attainment rates in rural areas are crucial for the sustainability and strengthening of both rural communities and countries (Halsey, 2018; Corbett, 2007).

Interest in the participation and attainment rates of higher education for youth living in rural areas has increased in recent years due to a number of converging influences. An

¹ *For ease of communication throughout the systematic review the term rural will be used to encompass regional, rural and remote communities

overarching influence is the pressure of globalisation and economic competitiveness, which has led to many governments worldwide to focus on increasing the number of young people attaining higher educational qualifications. These qualifications are necessary for success in the current knowledge economy and the future gig economy. Additionally, shifts in the global economy and rapid advances in technology have led to major changes in the structure of rural areas. These changes include both the type and availability of work in rural areas, as agriculture and mining evolve into high tech industries requiring skilled and knowledgeable workers, and the ways in which rural and urban areas interact (Sick, 2014; Corbett, 2007).

These changes have tended to negatively impact youth living in rural areas, more than youth in urban areas, due to the complex and multifaceted challenges that youth in rural areas have to overcome to access and participate in higher education (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black, & Lhuede, 2001; Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, HREOC, 1999; Cuervo, 2016). As a result, research on the participation and attainment of education for youth living in rural areas has been undertaken in many countries around the world and is slowly growing as a research field.

Differences among countries reveal varying relative advantages for youth in rural areas. Factors like geographical size, population density, and socioeconomic history can contribute to differences in educational achievement gaps, including at the secondary school level (Williams, 2005). However, lower aspirations for and attainment of higher education, combined with an underrepresentation of youth from rural areas in higher education remain common themes in rural research worldwide. For example, in Australia, despite several policy responses aimed at increasing higher education participation for youth in rural areas—including funding community based regional university hubs—the proportion of students from rural areas as a proportion of total undergraduate enrolments decreased between 2008 and 2015 (Halsey, 2018). Concerns over the disparity in higher education attainment between

youth in rural and urban Australia has increased focus on participation rates. However, the issue of lower attainment for youth in rural Australia persists and has yet to be synthesised.

The seminal literature, on which many subsequent studies have been built, include Elder and Conger (2000), Carr and Kafalas (2009), and Turley (2009). Elder and Conger's study of farmers during the "farm crisis" in the rural Midwest, America in the 1980's which was one of the first critical rural studies conducted. The authors examined youth in farming communities to further understand intergenerational ties to the land and factors that could contribute to youth being successful, both academically and socially, despite the hardships they faced in the agricultural crisis (Elder & Conger, 2000).

Carr and Kafalas (2009) highlighted rural depopulation that was occurring on a large scale in rural America and found that communities were unable to regenerate due to the youth leaving their rural communities in search of higher education and employment. Turley (2009) conducted a large-scale study in rural America and found that researchers needed to ensure that the decision-making process of youth living in rural areas was situated within the geographic context in which it occurs.

This research, along with subsequent studies, has identified several important broad groupings of factors that impact on higher education aspirations and attainment. These include social and emotional factors, cultural factors, socioeconomic factors, (Conger & Elder, 1994; Carr & Kafalas, 2009; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Helpworth, Mc Innis, & Stephanou, 1999), and geographic factors such as distance to higher education institutions (Parker et al., 2016; Turley, 2009). However, a significant amount of this research consists of studies that are USA centric, and the qualitative research literature often comprises single case studies set in specific rural contexts. Nevertheless, collectively, there is a growing body of rich and diverse qualitative research exploring higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment of youth living in rural areas.

These qualitative studies contribute valuable understandings as they provide analytical depth and contextual detail of complex social situations from a wide variety of methodological perspectives and approaches (Pope, Bond, Morrison-Saunders & Retief, 2013). However, there is yet to be a systematic review of this literature that could provide a contextualised perspective and provide a synthesis of the collective wisdom of decades of qualitative rural research.

The aim of this systematic review is therefore to seek collective wisdom through reviewing and synthesising a large number of qualitative studies which explore the differential effects of geography on higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment of youth living in rural communities. This qualitative systematic review allows for bringing together individual qualitative study's findings to build a collective understanding of the data and provide a framework on which future qualitative research can be analysed. It is hoped that the framework will assist with further understanding of contextualised findings whilst generating collective understandings that can lead to the development of practical solutions. Additionally, it should support a shift towards understanding both social processes and structures that impact on youths' higher education aspirations and attainment. I begin this systematic review by outlining my objectives, methodological considerations, research questions, and the method underpinning the study.

Objectives

The objective of this qualitative systematic review was to synthesise the large body of rich and diverse qualitative literature using thematic analysis to build collective understandings of the issues and phenomena relating to the variability of higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas. As Pope et al. (2013) assert, "The study of education and social sciences is complex, social, and highly

context-dependent, and so the value of a qualitative synthesis cannot be understated” (p.2).

Specifically, this systematic review addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How are higher education, and occupational aspirations and attainment of youth influenced by living in a rural area?

RQ2: What are the differential effects of socio-cultural factors in relation to higher education, and occupational aspirations and attainment of youth living in diverse rural areas?

The aim of the review was to identify key and emerging themes within the study area, as well as identify relationships, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature. It also sought to explore reasons for these and suggest directions for future research.

Methodology

In this study, I applied a systematic review method to locate, critically evaluate, and synthesise studies about issues and phenomena relating to the geographical effects on the variability of higher educational and occupational aspirations for youth living in rural areas. The formal qualitative systematic review process undertaken, enabled combining mixed-method and qualitative research data to draw conclusions of the collective meanings. A qualitative synthesis involves the challenge of combining the results of many unique and contextualised studies (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2006). In this type of synthesis, the themes can usually be summarised fairly easily, however, the challenge can be that two readers may interpret the meaning of the same themes differently. Therefore, my aim was to achieve transparency through a detailed recording of the process (Pope et al., 2006). A rigorous approach, which was also flexible enough to include a broad publication base, was taken as the best strategy to capture a meaningful and representative sample of literature. To improve the quality of reporting of the systematic review and to minimize reporting biases, the

literature search was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) statement (Liberati, Altman, Tetzlaff, Mulrow, Gotzsche et al., 2009; Moher, Tetzlaff, Tricco, Sampson & Altman, 2007). The PRISMA statement consists of a twenty-seven-item checklist including items such as title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, and discussions as well as a four-phase flow diagram representing the search protocol.

Method

Exploration and Database Search

To identify relevant studies related to educational and occupational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas, I used a combination of search strategies. These included (1) exploration and search through relevant databases, (2) reference list checking and (3) other sources (Papaioannou, Sutton, Carroll, Booth, & Wong, 2010). The search process and literature review were completed in November 2018. The search strategy aimed to find both published and unpublished studies. The three step process included (i) an initial limited search of the databases, followed by an analysis of the text words contained in the title and abstract; (ii) a second search using all identified keywords and index terms was then undertaken across all included databases selected for identifying relevant studies (ERIC; SocINDEX; PsychINFO & Academic Search Complete; Education Source; Web of Science; A+ Education and ProQuest) and a search for unpublished articles which included ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global was conducted; (iii) the reference lists of the included papers were then searched for any other relevant studies.

Each database was searched from inception, and searches were conducted on 27th February 2018 and 16th March 2018. Systematic searches were developed for each database and were peer reviewed by a senior librarian in consultation with all three reviewers: myself, my supervisor, and my co-supervisor. The three reviewers brought diverse perspectives, including international backgrounds, and varying experiences in rural and urban contexts.

Two reviewers had lived in rural Australia: one was originally from a rural area, and the other had extensive experience teaching in rural regions and living in both rural and urban settings. Drawing on my own experiences of growing up in an urban area, moving to teach in a rural community, and raising my children in rural Australia, I contributed a perspective shaped by both urban and rural lived experiences, fostering a nuanced and reflexive approach to the research. The search strategy is presented in Appendix A (see APPENDIX A Table 5.0 *Systematic Search of Evidence and Results*). I searched with an interdisciplinary approach within the disciplines of education, geography, psychology, and sociology. The search terms included combinations of the keywords and terms associated with contexts of aspirations, attainment, rurality, education, and occupation.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants:

This qualitative review considered studies that included youth and young adults living in or from rural areas (defined as from thirteen years of age to mid-twenties).

Phenomena of Interest:

This review considered studies that explored the educational and occupational aspirations and attainment of youth and young adults living in or from rural areas.

Types of studies:

This review considered peer reviewed studies that focused on qualitative data, including designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, action research, and feminist research that explored factors shaping educational aspirations and attainment of youth and young adults living in or from rural areas. The quantitative perspective of mixed-methods studies, review articles, meta-synthesis, studies with no available full text in the database, editorials, commentaries, letters, conference abstracts, study of special populations,

studies with populations other than youth or young adults, and non-English studies were excluded. There were no date restrictions.

Screening and Selection

Figure 5 provides an overview of the screening and selection process (PRISMA 2007). The literature search was undertaken in February 2018 and March 2018. I conducted a systematic search of the following electronic databases: ERIC; SocINDEX; PsychINFO & Academic Search Complete; Education Source; Web of Science; A+ Education; ProQuest and ProQuest Dissertations & These Global. Titles and abstracts retrieved from the database were screened by all three independent researchers. Screening identified studies that potentially met the inclusion criteria outlined above and their potential relevance for full review was assessed. The initial screening used titles, subject headings, and abstracts to determine whether the study met the defined inclusion criteria. Duplicates were removed and the titles and abstracts were then screened. Articles that met the selection criteria during the title and abstract screening were kept and the full text articles were then reviewed independently by all three reviewers for inclusion. All screening was conducted in “Covidence” and was independently assessed by two of the reviewers. Disagreements between the reviewers were resolved through comprehensive discussions to reach agreement.

Assessment of Methodological Quality

As qualitative studies can vary in rigor, it is recommended to decide on which studies are of sufficient quality are to be included. Determining what quality criteria must be met and how those criteria will be evaluated is part of this process (Patton, 2015, p. 303). In this review the qualitative studies selected for retrieval were assessed by the three independent reviewers for methodological quality prior to inclusion in the review (one reviewer screened all articles and a subset of 40 % were screened by an additional two reviewers). The research

quality, in relation to methodology, methods and analyses used and the interpretation of the data, of the selected articles was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist. I have included studies that met the inclusion criteria and met at least six of the criteria in the critical appraisal skills programme (2017).

Data Extraction

I used a rigorous and transparent data extraction process for this review. The aim was to identify themes, theories, and methodologies, to act as a mechanism for scrutiny of the included papers, and to establish a transparent process for the literature analysis. A data extraction proforma was developed to ensure that a consistent analysis process for each paper. The proforma was developed based on the research questions and outcomes, specifically including factors like rural location, context, participants, and methodology which was pertinent to this review. The data extraction was done using an iterative process where I checked my coding and discussed any complications with two additional researchers at regular meetings.

Data Synthesis

First, I undertook a descriptive analysis of the field of the 108 studies reviewed. Then I imported the full text of included studies into NVivo 12 software program and conducted a thematic synthesis of the study findings. The thematic synthesis was an iterative process using grounded theory methodology to identify themes that emerged from the 108 studies in the review. To analyse the extracted data, I employed thematic synthesis, a methodology aimed at enhancing the transparency of synthesising qualitative data and facilitating the construction of new analytical themes from the collated data (Aveyard, 2010; Charmaz, 2014; Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000).

The thematic synthesis involved several stages. Initially, I identified broad descriptive coding themes through analysis of an initial subset of papers. All three reviewers then met to agree on a set of codes to apply to the rest of the data. I grouped the codes together into clearly defined themes which formed a working analytical framework. I read the data line by line and undertook a process of open coding relating to (but not limited to) structures, experiences, behaviours, and values. Line by line reading of the text helped me to make visible things that otherwise would not have been revealed, such as things that were not explicitly expressed. For example, underlying beliefs of being “smart” or “not smart” which impacted on higher educational aspiration and attainment influenced by neoliberal educational discourse (Fairclough, 1995). This step contributed to challenging the developing analysis as I needed to explain and understand differences within the data (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000). My analysis was strengthened through this step.

The qualitative data was large and one of the major challenges for me was to be able to manage and summarize the data during the analysis process. The qualitative data consisted of over two thousand pages of text and took considerable time to analyse. I used NVivo to store and organise the data so that it was accessible for the analysis process. Another challenge I faced was to summarise the data, whilst at the same time keeping the original nuanced contextualised meanings. To achieve this, I included references to quotes which revealed and articulated deep nuanced findings.

Throughout the research I recorded detailed memos of my thoughts, ideas, and interpretations of the data (Jones, 2000). I drew on these to further explore any potential themes or concepts that I identified. This process enabled me to identify similarities and differences across the studies and within each study, and to map out connections between the categories to explore relationships. I also undertook a reflexive approach throughout the analysis to be mindful of my own assumptions, beliefs, and social location in relation to rurality. I was particularly mindful of not unintentionally privileging urban values and

discourses. For example, I was aware that my personal experience, having lived, taught, and raised children in both urban and rural Australia, could influence how I interpreted the aspirations of youth in rural areas. I was mindful that my urban background could sometimes frame my perspective in ways that risked privileging urban-centric values, such as equating success with aspirations tied to urban pathways, like higher education or professional careers in urban centres. At the same time, my experiences in rural Australia provided valuable insights into the unique contextual factors shaping aspirations in rural areas, such as connection to place, and pathways aligned with local opportunities. Reflexive practices, including revisiting my memos and critically analysing how these dual perspectives and assumptions could shape my interpretations, helped me to challenge potential biases. Through this reflection, I recognised how urban-centric perspectives often dominated the discourse in some studies, framing urban pathways as the norm, potentially sidelining aspirations that align with rural perspectives and narrowing the understanding of youths' aspirations. This process allowed me to critically examine and broaden my interpretations, ensuring a more nuanced and balanced understanding of youth aspirations across different contexts.

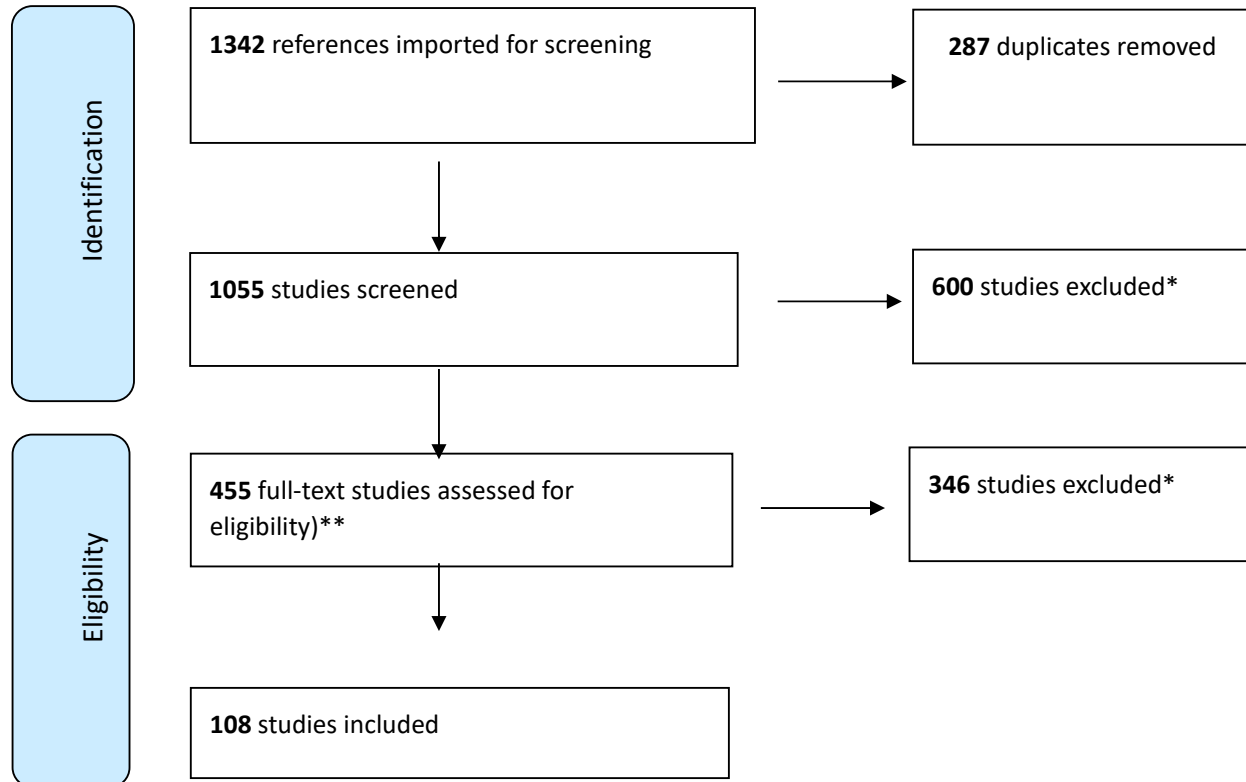
There were several iterations of the themes and subthemes as new data was identified throughout the thematic analysis so that no data was ignored. I only finalised the framework of key themes and subthemes after the coding of the last study in the review had been completed in accordance with the interpretive stage of thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Results

Qualitative systematic reviews vary in size, dependent on the topic, research question, and inclusion criteria. Similar qualitative systematic reviews varied between a small number of included studies (9) and a larger number (70). This systematic review included 111 studies. Due to the aim of seeking deep collective understandings, it was necessary to analyse the complexity and nuances of the contextualised qualitative studies in detail. This has resulted in a substantial results and discussion section that is longer than found in a typical systematic review.

Study Inclusion

A search of the literature yielded 1342 potentially relevant studies (1046 from SocINDEX with full text; ERIC; Education Source; PsychINFO & Academic Search Complete, 65 from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 98 from A+ Education, 86 from Web of Science, 14 from ProQuest Political Science Complete, 20 from ProQuest Research, and 13 from ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection). After 287 duplicates were removed, 1055 studies were screened by title and abstracts. After screening, 601 studies were excluded, leaving 454 for full-text review. From these, 346 were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. 109 studies were assessed for methodological quality, only one study was excluded. One-hundred and eight studies were included in the systematic review synthesis. Figure 5 presents a PRISMA flow diagram of the search results and study selection process.

Figure 5*PRISMA Flow Diagram: Qualitative Systematic Review*

*based on inclusion/exclusion criteria

** 1 study was excluded based on methodological quality

Descriptive Characteristics

The studies included in the review varied considerably in terms of publication dates, sample size, target student group and methodology. The majority of studies were published as journal articles (n=83), just under a quarter were dissertations (n=19), the remaining studies (n=6) were reported in other formats (two studies were research reports, three were conference papers and one was a book chapter). The retrieved studies were undertaken around the world (see APPENDIX A Table 5.1 *Geographic Regions of Research*) with 81 studies from English speaking countries and 27 studies from non-English speaking countries. Most of

the studies took place in the USA (n = 43) and Australia (n = 30), and Canada (n = 7). However, there were also studies from several other countries including Malawi, Ethiopia, India, Peru, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Frye, 2012; Rao, 2010, Camfield, 2011; Crivello, 2011; Del Franco, 2014; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Ames, 2013). In general, the age of participants across the studies ranged from high school age 15 years to young adults (early – mid twenty's).

The qualitative studies included within the review were published between 1985 and 2016. The number of studies concerned with aspirations for and attainment of higher education of youth living in rural areas has increased steadily from 1985 – 1995 (n = 10) to 2011 -2020 (n = 57) demonstrating an increase in rural research in this field (see APPENDIX A Table 5.2 *Year of Publication*).

The majority of the studies were positioned within the discipline of education (n=54), with 12 studies in the discipline of sociology and 2 in policy. However, nearly two thirds of the studies (n=40) were inter-disciplinary. The interdisciplinary studies included the following disciplines: Gender and Education; Youth Studies; Social Science; Social Impact; Regional Development; Psychology; Social Economic Research; Social Work; Geography; Human Development; Family Studies; Anthropology; Arts; Public Affairs; Sociology; International Development; Development Studies; Comparative International Education; Politics; Agriculture. The most common research design was qualitative (n=83), followed by mixed method studies (n=25). The qualitative methodology most frequently used was interviews with youth living in rural areas. Other methods included focus groups, ethnography, case studies, and surveys (see APPENDIX A Table 5.3 *Methodology*). Most of the studies were prospective (n=87) and approximately a fifth of the studies (n=24) were retrospective. Six of the studies were longitudinal (see APPENDIX A Table 5.4 *Type of Study*).

The methodological quality was assessed using the “Critical Appraisal Skills Program” (see APPENDIX A Table 5.5 *Methodological Quality*). Most of the criteria were

met in the included studies. Seven studies met all the criteria, twenty-one studies met nine of the criteria, most of the studies (sixty-three) met eight of the criteria, and fifteen studies met seven of the criteria. One study met four of the criteria only and so due to a potential high risk of bias this study was excluded from the synthesis. The two criteria that were least addressed were: reflexivity of the researcher and an explicit statement of consideration of ethical issues. Reflexivity was the least met criteria. It was also interesting to note most of the research studies (n = 80) did not explicitly state how ethical issues had been taken into consideration. Overall, the methodological quality of studies was considered good.

Thematic Analysis

In analysing the 108 papers, six key and emerging themes were identified. The themes I identified were inter-relational and at times mutually reinforcing (Figure 5.1 *Inter-relationships of Key and Emerging Themes*). To identify the shared core findings across the studies I used grounded theory methodology described in the methods section. The methodology allowed themes to emerge from the papers in an iterative process rather than being predetermined through a hypothesis or a theoretical framework. All text segments in the selected articles in which findings related to the six themes were coded. A single paper therefore could be coded as addressing several of the key and emerging themes. After coding the articles, I analysed the data within each theme. In the findings section I elaborate further on the key and emerging themes (and sub-themes) and present examples with coded excerpts of the original studies.

The six broad key and emerging themes I identified relate to capital; social and structural systems; risk; place/rurality; globalisation and political policies and identity development. All these themes were found to have contributed to higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas (Figure 5.1 *Inter-relationships of Key and Emerging Themes*). Figure 5.1 represents a framework I developed

during the data synthesis and thematic analysis stage to assist me with interpreting the large volume of qualitative data in the review.

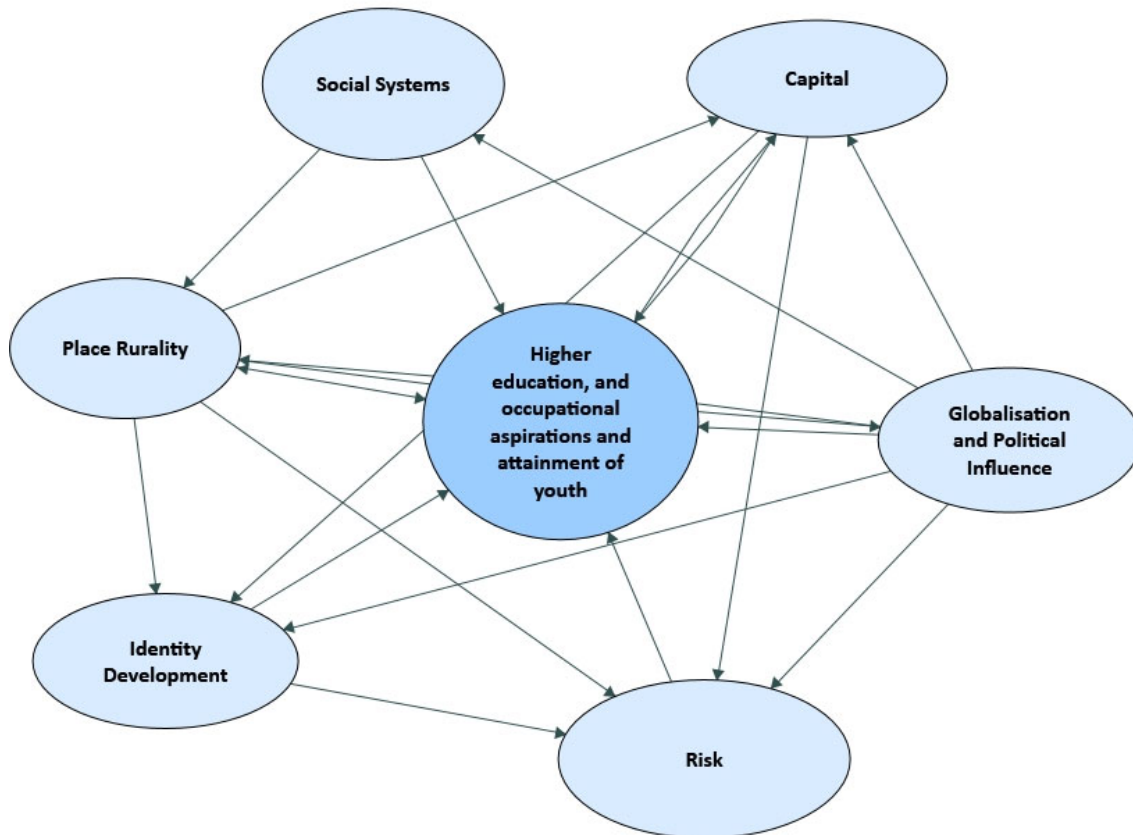
During the iterative process of the thematic analysis, I identified the key themes represented in most of the studies, as well as identifying important emerging themes. These emerging themes tended to be less explicit in the data and required in-depth analysis to be made visible. Through the iterative process of my data synthesis and analysis, I recognised that the themes were inter-relational and at times mutually reinforcing. As a result of this process and my insights, I developed the framework (Figure 5.1 *Inter-relationships of Key and Emerging Themes*).

The arrows between the themes indicate their inter-relationships. The arrows show the direction of relationships and indicate the mutual relation between one theme and another. I determined the arrow direction and connection between themes in an iterative process, as I conducted the thematic analysis. This framework assisted me with more in-depth analysis of the broader issues. I found that it was helpful to consider all six interrelated themes in the framework, and to consider the interrelationships and mutual reinforcement between the themes to fully explore factors influencing higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas.

For example, when considering the theme of risk in relation to youths' higher educational aspirations it was necessary to understand these actual and perceived risks in relation to (and in the context of) youths' access to capital (e.g. social, economic, cultural that enables or constrains), place/rurality (e.g. social processes and practices), social and structural systems (e.g. is there access to public transport and quality education), globalisation and neoliberal policy implementation (e.g. how has globalisation restructured their rural town, what employment is there, what policies enable or constrain access to higher education, and effects of discourses on aspirations), and identity development (what family, community factors and influences enable or constrain). In considering the interrelationships, it is possible

to gain deep nuanced understandings of how actual and perceived risks may impact on a youth's higher education aspirations.

The framework also helped me shift the focus of the analysis toward understanding the role of both social processes and structures through which various factors—such as capital, social and structural systems, risk, place/rurality (geography), globalisation, political policies, and identity development—interrelate to impact and influence the development of higher education and occupational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas. Moreover, this shift moves the focus away from primarily being on the individual or group attributes, such as youth's dispositions and academic achievements. This shift in analysis focus is crucial to avoid misrecognition of abilities of youth living in rural areas (Burke, 2013). It also helps to better understand the differing circumstances that can enable or constrain their aspirations for and attainment of higher education. Additionally, this approach allows for further examination of the impacts of subtle processes in discourses and urban privileging (Ball, 2014; Corbett, 2007).

Figure 5.1*Inter-relationships of Key and Emerging Themes*

Note. The arrows indicate the inter-relationships and mutual reinforcement between the themes.

This section presents the findings on the six key and emerging themes identified from the systematic review data analysis. Because the production and analysis of data are intertwined processes, in this section we present the results with some contextual discussion using excerpts from the study findings to illustrate the key and emerging themes.² For clarity, this section is organised under the series of theme headings although the themes are inter-

² For ease of communication quotes from study participants are italicised and quotes from the authors of the studies are in plain text.

relational, and at times mutually reinforcing. Insights relating to each of these key and emerging themes are presented below.

Key Themes:

1. Capital
2. Social and Structural Systems
3. Risk
4. Place / Rurality
5. Globalisation and Political Influence
6. Identity Development

Theme 1: Capital

Figure 5.2

Inter-relationships: Identified Capital Sub-Themes

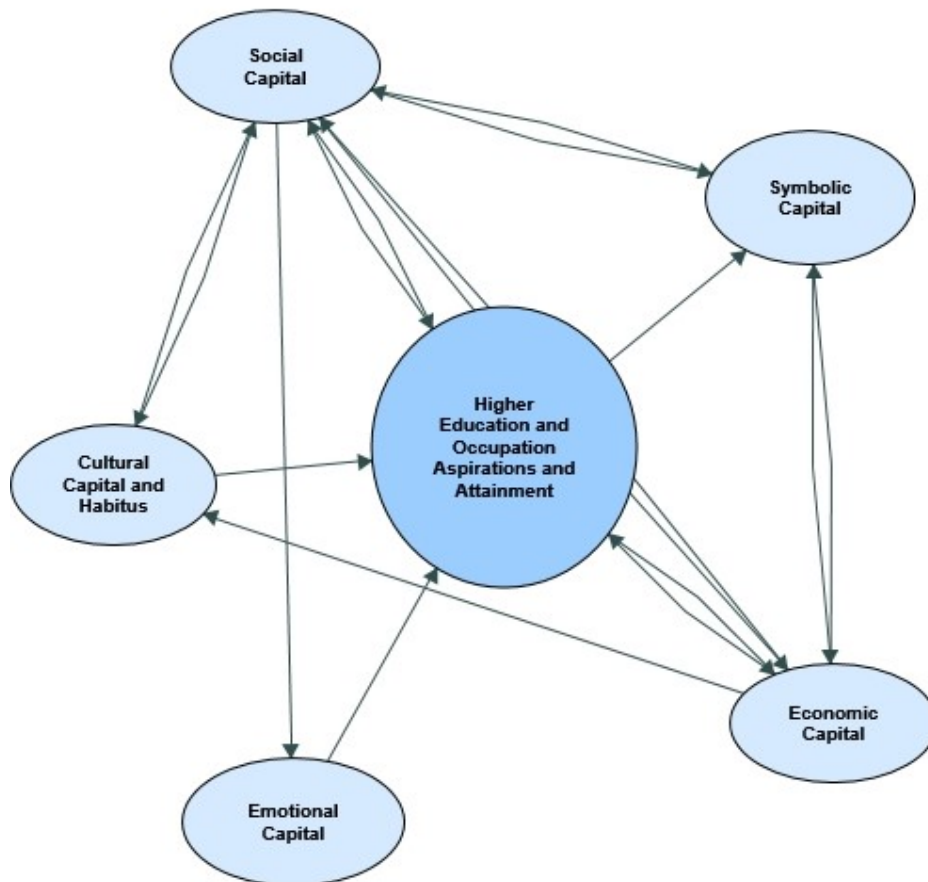


Figure 5.2 illustrates the inter-relationships between the identified capital sub-themes. This first theme capital contains five sub-themes, and includes studies of family, peer, and rural community environments. These studies interviewed high school students about their educational and occupational aspirations and their family, peer, school, and community environments, as well as parents and community members to gain an understanding of educational and occupational aspirations. Most of the studies (n = 106) in the systematic review contained the overarching theme of capital. The themes reflected the theories of cultural capital and social capital. These theories were drawn on to analyse students' development of aspirations to and attainment of higher education and different occupations. Most studies recognised the effects of social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital. The effects of symbolic capital and emotional capital appeared to be emerging themes.

Sub-Themes:

1. Social Capital
2. Cultural Capital
3. Habitus
4. Economic Capital
5. Symbolic Capital
6. Emotional Capital

Sub-Theme 1: Social Capital

Social capital was the most researched area of capital. The majority of studies examined youths' social capital in relation to the composition and characteristics of their social networks, and how these enabled or constrained higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment (Hampton-Garland, 2009; Nithya, 2010; Martinez & Cervera, 2012; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Punch, 2002; Holt, 2012; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Hawkins, 2017; Lowe, 2015; Seeberg, 2014). Most studies tended towards a normative

approach to social capital, approaching it as something lacking in youth in rural areas and thus aiming to increase social capital to improve higher education and occupation outcomes. Some studies drew on Bourdieu's theory to explore differential access to social capital; however, the depth of engagement with and interpretation of Bourdieu's theory varied (Esveld, 2004; Ellison, Wohn, Greenhow, Manning, & Kunkel, 2014; Furlong & Carmel, 1995).

Analysis of the findings highlighted that youth living in rural areas appeared to share many common experiences, such as tight-knit communities and extensive social networks, as well as shared values and norms, however they developed differing aspirations, including higher education aspirations (Esveld, 2004; Ellison et al., 2014; Furlong, & Carmel, 1995). Further, some studies found that even within a shared environment, such as a school, youth can have different social networks and capital (Nelson, 2016).

Social Networks

Youths' interactions with social networks were found to influence future higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment. Several factors were examined in relation to how youth living in rural communities drew on the resources available in their social networks when forming their educational and occupational aspirations. These factors included the role of important relationships; the youth's network of relationships and the associated values and expectations; access to bonding and bridging social capital; and the local culture of the community (Esveld, 2004; Martin & Duke, 1996; Corra, 2015; Tieken, 2016; Young, Fraser, & Woolnough, 1997; Stuart, 2008; Staley, 2017; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009).

Further, youths' future educational and occupational aspirations were often found to be interrelated with the composition of their social networks and their everyday lived experiences in rural communities (Ellison et al., 2014). Interactions with parents, teachers, and other adults engaged in activities with the youth—such as sports coaches, part time employers, and other local role models—were shown to shape youths' aspirations towards

education and careers (Ellison et al., 2014; Esveld, 2004; Elder et al., 1996; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016; Beasley, 2016). Shepard & Marshall (2000) highlighted that having people to admire and respect, such as friends and coaches, influenced all their participants in the research:

“With basketball, like my coaches were really, like they taught me a lot of things . . . not just about basketball. They are really incredible people . . . probably my biggest role models. You just look up to them . . . They taught me about teamwork and taking pride in myself. Taught me a lot of different things, like hard work and just like, never giving up . . .” (p. 164).

Many studies explored how social networks could improve a youths’ ability to access resources and gain new social capital. Findings highlighted that in many rural communities, the small population size means most people know each other in some capacity, thus creating extensive social networks of ties. These extended networks, including teachers, local business owners, friends of the family, and sports coaches, were found to help some youth gain information about education and employment opportunities. However, further research revealed that not all youth could benefit from their networks, with advantages depending on their social positioning in the community. Shamah & MacTavish (2009) discussed family social location, how families engaged in community activities, and how their children perceive and construct their family’s place within the local social hierarchy. Some families, by actively contributing to the community, were seen as having a high social status. This status provided their children more opportunities to engage in community activities, which in turn often led to gaining the limited opportunities available for part-time work and other experiences:

“A lot of parents are involved in things. ... More often than not they are trying to be involved... It’s more [a] farming community, they know everybody, working with kids, they know them.” (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009, p.41).

Youth from “professional” or “farming” families in the rural community were more likely to be offered the limited employment opportunities in the community (San Antonio, 2016; Holt, 2012; Corbett, 2007). Moreover, youth who had more social capital in the community were able to use this to gain new social capital, including work opportunities.

In contrast, the small size of rural communities meant that some youth were excluded from accessing opportunities within their community. This exclusion further limited their ability to gain social capital, often because their families were perceived as having lower social status. However, some studies demonstrated that youth were able to use different strategies to gain social capital and build their networks despite their family’s social location:

“It’s not what you know but who you know.’

‘I reckon if you play footy, or if you are in the footy or the soccer club or some club like that, if you know heaps of people it would be easier to get a job because you just ask everyone if there is any work going.’

“Being polite to people, they really appreciate it. Then it goes on to someone else, they tell someone else, and it goes on. People come in and they actually know you and they talk to you by name. It is a way to get your name around so that you can get a job later on. Oh, some days you just feel like staying at home, but you have got to do it, so you put your mind to it and go to work. You can’t just do a no-show. It is sort of really hard [to get work]. It depends on if you have got a name around the town. If you haven’t then you’ve got no hope. But if you have got a good name and your name is around then, yeah” (Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011, p. 157).

Social networks in rural communities were found in some studies to create homogeneity by discouraging youth from pursuing pathways outside of their network norms which may restrict the options youth consider in relation to going on to higher education and pursuing a particular occupation:

“... pretty much, if you're not a certain way then you're downgraded. Everybody that is different gets downgraded.” In an area where everyone knows each other, and most people have similar backgrounds, things or people that differ from the norm may not be well received. Tyler also disliked this about his community because “it kind of puts a damper on innovation, creativity, diversity and that kind of thing.” (Corra, 2015 p. 147).

Some studies explored how ethnic communities in rural areas effectively utilise their social networks. These studies revealed that although students from minority backgrounds may experience less of certain types of social capital, they have access to other unique forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) emphasised the critical role of familial and social support in academic success and persistence for their youth. For example, a study of second-generation Hmong in a rural ethnic enclave showed how the enclave's influence positively impacts educational attainment. The study found that the enclave's structure and function served as a shield, protecting its members from discrimination by the dominant culture and other negative influences. In other words, the enclave through resisting dominant culture by working together was able to gain social capital (Paiva, 2016).

Overall, social networks in rural areas were found to play a role in shaping youths' higher education aspirations. These networks were found to either facilitate or hinder their access to resources and opportunities for higher education and career opportunities.

Social capital at the family, peers, and community level factors were further examined in relation to social support and information related social capital. These studies described the role of family members—parents, siblings, and partners—and the wider community in shaping youths’ higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment (Burnell, 1999; Beasley, 2016; Stuart, 2008; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Hendrickson, 2012; Bachechi, 2015; Lawrence, 1998; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995). They consistently revealed an emphasis in youths’ narratives on their interactions with parents or family friends when discussing their educational and occupational aspirations. Overall, families were found to influence, motivate, set expectations, and provide support in varying degrees and ways that either enhanced or constrained higher education aspiration and attainment. Interestingly, Esveld (2004) found that family expectations placed pressure on some youth living in rural areas:

“Eric: My parents expect me to go to college.

Mau: [They] expect me to go to college.

Kate: They don't, like, pressure me all the time, "saying, you're going to college, "but if I (she laughs) if I like, joke around and say, "no I'm not going. then they might say something like, "Oh yeah, you are." But--it's not like they're gonna make me, I mean -it's pretty much my decision..." (p.102).

Youth often described their desire to either emulate or avoid being like their family (Corra, 2015):

“I grew up in a low-income family, so I had four sisters and a brother, so it was pretty tough living with that many siblings and having low income. My mother and my father both are disabled, so they draw SSI maybe \$600 a month at the most, and that’s just enough to pay the bills. So, it’s like I wanna do something and be successful for myself

so that maybe when I grow up and I marry and have kids, I won't have to have my kids struggle through what I had to" (p. 21).

Stuart (2008) findings reported the strong influence of family:

"Roger's grandmother has a Stillman sticker over her bed. She has encouraged him to attend college at Stillman since he was little and that is his college preference. Roger has visited numerous other college campuses, but states Stillman is where he wants to attend. Roger's grandmother's dream of one of her family members graduating from Stillman College has influenced his decision to attend this institution. He wants to be the one grandchild who fulfills her dream. Several participants note dedication to being the first family member to complete college. The ability of this grandmother to instill college aspirations in Roger denotes the importance of reaching participants early by providing information on the importance of their educational pursuit beyond high school" (p. 85).

Youth were found to derive two main forms of social capital "social support" and "information related social capital" from their families, peers, and community. Social capital in the form of support appeared to be especially important for students who were from non-traditional backgrounds in higher education, such as those who were first in their family to attend higher education or come from low socioeconomic or working-class backgrounds. Strong social support, which includes supportive relationships and encouragement from family and friends, was found to positively affect the development and attainment of educational and occupational aspirations (Corra, 2015; Lambert, 2010; Beasley, 2016; Tieken, 2016; Esveld, 2004). Corra (2015) findings highlighted the positive effects of social support:

"Similarly, it was important for Sarah to know that she had people who believed in her: "Oh it means a lot because there's a lot of people who wouldn't have the support,

people bringing them down or tellin' them they can't do it, but knowing that I have, uh proud of— people behind me, just supporting me encouraged me to go ahead and do it and do what I want.” This emotional support was bolstered by help preparing for her future. Sarah recalled how her mom helped her research different types of jobs and what would be best for her” (p. 114).

Lawrence (1998) found that some families strong support and encouragement made the difference between a child being able to go on to higher education or not, such as in this example of a family who would need a scholarship for their child:

“John: There were all kinds of scholarships if they would only try.

B: If they would only try, what do you mean?

John: There used to be hundreds of them. There are all kinds.

Shirley: That nobody knows about, is what he means.

John: Right, nobody knows about them and, I mean the kids don't, they don't go to find out where they could find out.

Shirley: You know what I did? I hired a friend of mine who was a teacher at Tremont at the time and he filled out the scholarship applications. I got to the point where I said, “No, not again, I can't do it.” “There's nothing to it, bring 'em down, he says. And I give him a dozen eggs or, if we were picking, crab meat. I says, “I dread it just like my income tax, but he used to do all my scholarship forms. That is half the battle.

John: He knew what he was doing and how to do it, we didn't know. (p. 285).

Similarly, Shamah & MacTavish (2009) found that parental support played a vital role in aspiration development:

“Dan plays sports all year long and his grandparents are often at games cheering him on in the stands. When I asked him how involved his parents are in school, he tells me

that his parents still come to everything and adds, "They support me in choices, they give me their opinion, but then they say it's your choice." (p. 92).

Social support was shown to influence persistence, motivation, and success for some youth aspiring to higher education (Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Paiva, 2016; Martinez & Cervera, 2012; Kenway & Hicky-Moody, 2011; Fataar, 2010). The findings highlighted how for some youth in rural communities who are interested in higher education, often do not complete the application process. Instead, they create an alternative narrative about waiting to see what might happen after school or simply forgetting to complete an application (Corra, 2015). Some studies suggest that this issue may be due to the youth lacking social support from someone who is able to follow up with them and help complete the applications. Without this support, the process can seem too hard, leading youth to opt out. In part, this was found to be because the youth is already anxious or nervous about moving away or undertaking a degree. Thus, even small barriers, such as completing applications, can deter them from pursuing higher education. For this reason, several studies have emphasised the importance of social support in assisting youth from rural areas to attain higher education.

Youth living in rural communities were also found to have differential access to information-related social capital, which can either assist or limit an individual's development of choices and aspirations. This information can include understanding curriculum requirements, higher education application processes, and potential occupations. Youth living in rural communities reported that a lack of available information from family, school, and the wider community negatively impacted on being able to plan properly for higher education and a career. Youth expressed frustration at the lack of career guidance information available to them (Bachechi, 2015; Doyle et al., 2009; Young et al., 1997; Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Bachechi (2015) emphasised how important it is for youth to have access to information:

“Kim: What about things that you didn't learn that you really wish you had learned?”

Audrey: Um..... I wish I would've I wish I would've learned how important that foundation was - high school - and I wish I would've known... I wish somebody would have told me..... you know, like now with my little brother I really try to encourage him and..... and I wish somebody would've told me, "look if you do really well in high school, then you can get a full ride scholarship and not have to pay a penny out of your pocket for college." And I put myself through college, so I wish someone would have just sat down with me and been like.... you know, "you really need to try hard right now because it can affect how you do in college, it can get you college paid for." And no one really did. My parents just said, "you're going to college. You're going to go." But that was it, and I don't even think they knew how to prepare for college 'cause they didn't go themselves” (p. 211).

Notably, Friesen & Purc-Stephenson (2016) argued that the perceived lack of career guidance in some situations may reflect Bourdieu's (1977) idea of habitus, as it reaffirmed youth living in rural areas beliefs that higher education was not a realistic goal for them:

“He tried making it seem like such a big deal and it kinda made me think, like . . . I'm not good enough . . . and my other teachers were like, “Yeah, the workload in university is crazy,” like they were always talking about . . . how intense it is, and through all my teachers talking about their university experiences, saying how like, “Oh yea, I have had so much debt,” or, “I didn't have any time to socialize 'cause I was always studying,” or there were stories like, I don't know, just there weren't really any good stories from university from any of my teachers, other than what they learned, which is the benefit but ... but they like focused on the barriers, maybe a lot. (male, 20 years) (p. 148).

Additionally, several studies questioned how the depth and extent of information and knowledge about higher education and occupations can vary according to the composition of the youth's social networks (Ellison et al., 2014). A noticeable lack of information was observed for youth whose families did not have members who had attended higher education or had experience in diverse professional careers, which was seen to be limiting for youth's aspiration development. Youth whose parents had not attended higher education often lacked crucial information about it. In the study by Ellison et al. (2014), when two first-generation participants were asked if they received information from their families, they responded:

“Not really. They just tell me to make sure I go.”

“Nobody really talks to me about it. (Laughter) I really just talk to myself about it.”

(p. 527)

Parental Education Level

Contrasting findings were evident regarding the relationship between parents' educational levels and their support for their child to go on to higher education. Several studies noted that parental support was present even among parents who had never experienced higher education themselves. However, changes in rural economies, their own financial struggles, and years of physical work motivated these parents to desire a better future and more options for their children (Lowe, 2015; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Beasley, 2016; Stuart, 2008; Holt, 2012; Corbett, 2007; Camfield, 2011; Valentine, Barham, Gitter, & Nobles, 2017; Dahlstrom, 1996; Crivello, 2011; Ames, 2013; Baker & Brown, 2008).

“My dad has been working labor intensive jobs since he was very young...and he wants to make sure that I don't do the same thing with my life. He wants me to go to college or get some sort of white collar job. So, I won't be throwing out my back at age 30 like he did” (Lowe, 2015 p. 12).

Therefore, a more complex picture emerged from the studies regarding parents' educational and occupational backgrounds and their support and encouragement for their child pursue higher education.

Career Diversity/ Role Models

In a similar way, youth living in rural areas where there was a lack of career diversity had difficulties firstly on envisioning different careers, and secondly, lacking deeper and accurate information about them:

“As Dan explained, in some ways Wallowa County “maybe” hindered his goals “because I don’t see all the jobs that there are, if you don’t see it, I don’t know about jobs that there are.” (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009 p. 105).

Some studies suggested the need to connect youth living in rural communities with mentors who have attained degrees and work in different professions, thereby expanding their social networks (Ganss, 2016; Esveld, 2004; Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Beasley, 2016; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Alleman & Holly, 2013; Bachechi, 2015; Hawkins, 2017; Holt, 2012; Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2010; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Good & Willoughby, 2007; Dahlstrom, 1996; Crivello, 2011; Machica & Machica, 2017; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993; Philipsen, 1993; Jeffries, 1993). Studies showed that youth who had a more diverse range of interactions in their social networks tended to develop a more comprehensive understanding of possible educational and occupational goals. Further, researchers identified several ways that youth were able to expand their networks and have more diverse interactions beyond their rural networks, including travel with family, travel for sports, school exchange students, and other school activities:

“For instance, Bob, the student who studied abroad, intended to pursue a career in

international relations, where he would have the opportunity to meet new people. He explained that before he went to Germany, he was sure he wanted a military career and even applied to a military academy, but the experience of living abroad made him rethink this because he would lose control over where he would be placed, and he wanted to experience travel from a “citizen’s perspective” not a “military perspective.” (Ellison et al., 2014, p. 526).

Social Media

The influence of the internet on gaining a more diverse social network and more social capital was examined in a few studies. Social media has enabled youth in rural areas to connect with people worldwide, exposing them to people with different lived experiences. One youth described how they had made friends through Xbox networked gaming, and welcomed the feedback they got from these diverse individuals:

“I’m always looking stuff up, I’m always talking about it, I’m getting the feedback and if they think it’s a good idea or not. Usually, I go to Xbox to ask if it’s a good idea from them because they look at life more realistically.” (Ellison et al., 2014 p.525).

For some youth living in rural communities, the internet provided a way of being exposed to geographic and individual diversity. This exposure was found to lessen their fear of living somewhere different, compared to youth who had not had this exposure (Lowe, 2015). Moreover, exposing youth to different kinds of people and cultures was found to assist in helping them envision varied life trajectories—geographically, academically, and occupationally—which could be particularly helpful for those who wished to pursue a life path outside of the norm of their local social networks (Ellison et al., 2014; Lowe, 2015).

Sub-Theme 2: Cultural Capital

The complexity of how youth living in rural communities develop higher education and occupation aspirations may be further understood through the theory of cultural capital. Various studies drew on cultural capital to explain the differential life experiences and opportunities available to youth living in rural communities, which in turn influence their development of aspirations and their attainment of higher education and different occupations (Martin & Duke, 1996; Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Elder et al., 1996; Ticken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Stuart, 2008; Britton, 2011; San Antonio, 2016; Doyle et al., 2009; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Bachechi, 2015; Lawrence, 1998; Furlong, & Cartmel, 1995; Hawkins, 2017; Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Holt, 2012; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011; Funnell, 2008; Del Franco, 2014; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Whitty, Hayton, & Tang, 2015; McSwan & Stevens, 1995; Pásztor, 2018; Jeffries, 1993; Baker & Brown, 2008).

Educational Cultural Capital

Many studies included a focus on the availability of educational cultural capital for youth in rural areas and how this may be gained and used to increase higher education aspirations and attainment. Educational cultural capital within a family was found to impact youths' formation of aspirations and their capacity to attain higher education. As stated in Stuart (2008) family members who have higher education experience are key influencers:

"My uncle, he works at a college in Florida, but he is an alumni at Alabama State. He talks to me almost every day about going to Alabama State." (p. 84).

Further, limited higher educational cultural capital was found to affect youths' planning and understanding of how to navigate higher education. Specifically, this included a lack of understanding of processes such as financial scholarships and applications, limited

knowledge of the different areas of study and their requirements, and a general unfamiliarity of what higher education will be like and what is expected of them. These factors were found to impact student's navigation of the planning and participation in higher education, sometimes resulting in degrees taking longer to complete, insufficient financial assistance, and students embarking on degrees programs that they might not have chosen had they had a better understanding of the degree. Moreover, in general higher education discourse was a barrier to many students (Bachechi, 2015; Machica & Machica, 2017; Penman & Oliver, 2011).

Additionally, some studies found that families with educational cultural capital will pass that on to their children; however, youth in rural areas who do not have families with higher education may not gain this cultural capital, which can be an additional barrier to higher education (Hampton-Garland, 2009; Bachechi, 2015; Corra, 2015). In some instances, it was found that families without educational cultural capital may unwittingly pass this on to their children:

“Mrs. D.: I had two thoughts about people from the community: people who had a tough time in the high school feel that they were not that well accepted at the high school - not very positive about the experience, [they] pass on to their children unknowingly. I think in addition to that, there are many people in this community for whom eighth grade was their highest expectation” (Lawrence, 1998 p. 286).

Embodied Cultural Capital

One study found that participants from rural communities, who each shared a different story from a different environment and through different lenses, had common factors that influenced their decision to drop out of college that went across their differences. However, none of the participants suggested that their childhood environment, schooling experiences, or family experiences contributed to their decision to drop out of higher education. This reveals

an unawareness of the impact of embodied cultural capital, or how the capital that is taken for granted as a way of life, influences their decisions (Holt, 2012). Baker & Brown (2008) contrast this with findings from their study in rural Wales, where participants were aware of embodied culture and capital. They alluded to how new cultural capital and cognitive habitus was acquired from the wider culture, influenced by newspapers, cinema, and radio during a period of time which encouraged non-conformity:

“Ceinwen (woman): ... that political awareness was there, and culture was tied in with that, so there was always discussions of politics, of philosophy ... books were everywhere in our house ... it was taken for granted that education was one of the central parts of life.... in general terms education was very highly regarded in the community ... literature was very important for my parents” (p. 66).

“Eifion (man): Although I came from what would be economically a very deprived back- ground, I think culturally and academically it was a very privileged background” (Baker & Brown, 2008 p. 66).

The study found that although the participants were not from affluent households, they acquired “embodied cultural capital” through a focus on self-improvement through learning. This enabled them to obtain more institutionalised forms of cultural capital. The participants described their community’s positive higher education narrative, emphasising the only reason the older generation had not gone on to higher education was because of economic reasons not ability. Furthermore, the narrative stressed the importance of taking the opportunity of higher education for the younger generation (Baker & Brown, 2008).

Several studies found that for youth in rural communities and their families, their embodied cultural capital affects their positioning in wider society in comparison to their urban counterparts. Embodied rural cultural capital as presented in many studies draws attention to a stereotypical image of a rural youth, including elements such as language (a

rural accent, phrases and words used), what clothes they wear, preferences for leisure activities, and food. These preferences are perceived as being deficit compared with that of an urban youth who is seen as having more sophisticated language, clothes, and taste (Corra, 2015; Ganss, 2016; Bachechi, 2015; Young et al., 1997; Funnell, 2008; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Dahlstrom, 1996; Crivello, 2011). Terms such as “redneck,” “hillbilly,” or other derogatory terms were seen to be used to infer that someone who lives in a rural area is not as sophisticated as someone who lives in the city (Bachechi, 2015).

Furthermore, some studies appeared to subtly privilege urban cultural capital over rural cultural capital without further interrogation. However, a limited number of studies did explicitly address this issue in relation to Bourdieu’s understanding of whose capital is valued in society. This example from one study discusses “bush capital” and the perception of this by people from the city:

“Fathers and sons, later ‘groups of mates’ at high school, enjoy ‘pig chasing’ on evenings and weekends. Where kangaroo shooting is done at rifle distance, pigs are ‘chased’ or run down by dogs and killed at close quarters by knife. As much as these practices can offend the senses of urban dwellers (especially teachers who regard student’s ‘pigging and rooing’ adventures as evidence of low intelligence), success in pig chasing and roo shooting has a place in selection for employment. Not the least is the endurance to keep moving forward to find a prey (to keep at a job until the work is done) and the feeling of ‘being pleased with myself,’ a pride in oneself, or, as property owners would say, feeling ‘good about themselves through work’” (Funnell, 2008, p.19).

Additionally, pride in being rural, “a kid from the country,” is socialised into youth living in rural communities through their family and community, who teach a child what it is to be rural. This was evident in several studies (Corra, 2015). However, when study

participants were asked to define “rural” they had difficulty, and often referred to rural as something that was felt:

“It's just something I feel. It's like... if you ever go into somewhere, you're like, well, 'it's rural.' You don't really know how to say it or express it, but you know it. It's just a word that pops into your head” (Corra, 2015 p. 150).

“I don't like cities. It's... I ... I don't like all the noise or... yeah, I'm just a country girl” (Corra, 2015 p. 151).

Hence, it could be seen that it is the contextualised embodied cultural capital that contributes to the norms of what is expected and a “this is what we do” and “who we are” disposition, and this was evident in many participants narratives:

“I'm 16, Westedge born and bred ... not a city man me. Don't like the city. Try and avoid it ... hate the traffic and all that. Hate it. I'm not too keen on Toowoomba. Roma probably as far as I like to go... wouldn't like to stay anywhere east of Roma...I love it out here. Love the bush. You can do whatever you like more or less. Pig chasing and roo shooting. Bit easier to do it out here. Property and houses are miles cheaper out here. I hate it down there. Absolutely do.

Mum was born out here. She's a country girl. Don't think she'd like it away either ... [Pop] used to be a shearer. Jackaroo that sort of stuff ... he's fitter than me sometimes ... he hates staying at home too. He's one of those people that have to do something” (Funnell, 2008, p. 20).

Embodied Cultural Capital and Relocation

Embodied cultural capital and its impact it when youth relocated to urban areas for higher education was examined in a small number of studies. These studies found that youth's dispositions sometimes caused them to be viewed as being different to urban youth, often in a

deficit way. Examples highlighted how youth from rural areas faced difficulties fitting in and participating in higher education in urban environments. They often felt looked down upon by their urban peers, perceived as deficit, and not accepted for who they were and what they valued:

“I notice [being from a rural community] more now than I used to, because . . . you know you don’t really realize as much that where you are from is way different than the rest of the world . . . but now that I’m here I totally noticed that it’s a lot of difference” (Ganss, 2016 p. 276).

Some youth described being better able to relate to others from similar backgrounds (Holt, 2012, Tieken, 2016). Consequently, some students from rural areas in higher education find themselves seeking out other students from rural backgrounds:

“to be involved with...the FFA [Future Farmers of America] and try to stay around people that are comfortable to be around.” (Ganss, 2016, p. 276).

Interestingly, several studies discussed how students from rural areas only became aware of their rural culture after they began studying in an urban environment. Cultural embodied capital was evident in this account from a student from a rural area who was unable to connect with the “cultured rich kids” when they attended a prestigious higher education institution:

“College was a disappointing culture shock. I went from 18 years in the woods, with working-class parents, to the most expensive school in the country near NYC, for a totally unstructured liberal arts degree. I’m glad I met all those cultured rich kids, but I’m glad I didn’t go there as one of them, and I’m pretty sure I’m glad I didn’t stay there with them. I left after my first year and went back home” (San Antonio, 2016 p. 257).

Cultural Capital and Motivation

Cultural capital was shown to have an effect on a youth's success in higher education in terms of motivation to persist, or resilience, when they encountered a challenge. Some youth from rural areas who had moved to an urban area for higher education were found to opt out of higher education rather than seek the appropriate help to overcome the challenge. This was found to be particularly the case for youth who were first in their family to go to higher education and who often felt uncomfortable and unfamiliar in a higher education institution in an urban area (Lawrence, 1998; Bachechi 2015; Penman & Oliver, 2011).

Youth from rural communities' face the additional challenges of moving away from home, and all the financial and emotional challenges that this brings, whilst commencing higher education in an unfamiliar, usually urban, environment. Findings showed that some youth from rural areas choose to pursue higher education because they feel that they should go due to changing economies in their rural communities. However, several studies also found that there was sometimes insufficient personal belief in their ability to succeed to override cultural, emotional, and economic challenges, leading some youth to opt out when faced with a problem (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010).

Higher Education Cultural Capital and Rural Communities

The lack of local higher educational opportunities in rural areas was explored. It was found that limited access to local higher education contributes to fewer youth living in rural areas aspiring and attaining higher education, resulting in less educational cultural capital in these areas (Cardak, Brett, Barry, McAllister, Bowden, Bahtsevanoglou & Vecci, 2017; Cairns, 2013). The positive impact of a local regional higher education institutes was discussed. However, it was noted that the range of degree course offerings is often more limited compared to urban higher education institutions (Eversole, 2002). Moreover,

regarding the type of institutionalised cultural capital that can be gained, the lack of regional offerings is a constraint, as society in general places higher value on degrees from more prestigious higher education institutions, and also judges the type of degree obtained, with higher status degrees are valued more in society).

This in turn, was found to limit the cultural capital that a young person in a rural area can gain, which then reduces their chances of gaining a more prestigious, higher paying job (Ellison et al., 2014). In America, many studies found youth in rural areas often choose a less prestigious two-year degree over a more prestigious four-year degree. This choice was influenced by the availability of 2-year degrees offered at local rural community colleges and the lower costs, both for the degree and because the student can live at home (Esveld, 2004; Ellison et al., 2014; Cox, Tucker, Sharp, Gundy & Rebellon, 2014).

A person gains cultural capital through attainment of higher education, university degrees are a powerful form of institutionalised cultural capital. In general, the studies found that youth in rural communities had more difficulty gaining the educational cultural capital that is valued and therefore rewarded in society. Rural cultural capital appeared to be valued less than urban cultural capital. One study went on to explore this concept in further detail to discuss how different capitals can operate in concrete situations, for example, “bush” capital may be highly valued in a rural area and less valued in an urban area (Funnell, 2008). Highlighting, that it is necessary to understand whose capital is valued in different contexts.

Globalisation Effects on Rural Cultural Capital

Globalisation has been problematic for rural habitus and capital, as its effects have changed rural economies and society to become city centric (Corbett, 2007). Where once rural capital was valued and needed in the local rural environment, now higher educational cultural capital is becoming more valued and needed for future work. Consequently, youth need to gain this dominant cultural capital, which often requires them to leave their rural communities (Corbett, 2007; Bachechi, 2015, Lowe, 2015; Cairns, 2013).

Rao & Hossain (2012) further explored the importance of a person's ability to negotiate with and use social and symbolic capital to quickly learn and adapt to new or changing environments in order to obtain dominant cultural capital. This is critical, for example, when adapting to an urban environment, learning which cultural capital is valued, and finding ways to obtain it. The study considered how the ability to negotiate one's identity and power—as valued rather than deficit—is crucial for gaining capital valued by the dominant group in society.

Sub-Theme 3: Habitus

The theory of habitus was used in several studies to understand how the preferences of youth living in rural communities are shaped. These studies demonstrate how the dominant culture and the beliefs of those surrounding the youth reinforce the internalisation of norms (Bourdieu, 1986; Corra, 2015; Webb, Black, Morton, Plowright & Roy, 2015; Funnell, 2008; Friesen, & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Seeberg, 2014; Azaola, 2012; Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Baker & Brown, 2008).

Family and Community Influence

Habitus informs cultural capital, which is one way through which parents transmit values to children. For example, it is not only a parent's stated views of education but also the culture which they construct within the family that influences a child's expectations for education. Many studies included in this systematic review found that youth living in rural areas referred to their families as being one of their biggest influences (Esveld, 2004; Corra, 2015; Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Seyfrit, Hamilton, Duncan, & Grimes, 1998; Lambert, 2010; Stuart, 2008; Britton, 2011; Hendrickson, 2012; Bachechi, 2015; Baker & Brown, 2008; Lawrence, 1998; Young et al., 1997; Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Holt, 2012; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Machica & Machica, 2017; Jeffries, 1993).

The form of influence varied, with some parents and family serving as inspiration for the youth to follow what the family does, while others served as a motivating force to pursue different goals. Regardless of the influence, all youth reflected the habitus of their families. Some youth spoke about their parents regrets of not pursuing higher education, while others talked about their family's expectations for them. In the studies, although the youths' plans varied, they were all influenced by their families and communities' expectations—or lack of expectations. These studies discussed how the youth had internalised their family and community expectations and influences as individual aspirations (Corra, 2015; Webb et al., 2015). Several studies discussed the influence towards higher education when the family had higher education cultural capital and habitus:

“Dan’s dad is a high school graduate who has always had steady and stable work; his mom holds a master’s degree. Dan has always known he would go to college, and his sights are set on a school a few hours away that his older sibling attends. “I always knew I would go to college. I never thought about just going into the workforce or the military. It’s just how I grew up, even though my dad didn’t [go to college]” (Shamah, & MacTavish, 2009, p. 92).

Other studies described influences on youth from families and communities in which there was limited educational cultural capital and habitus. For example, Webb et al. (2015) explained how in the industrial area of Westvale, young men's career expectations and aspirations drew strongly on the traditions associated with the locality and with their families' histories in that locality:

“my brother is now a 4th Year Boiler Maker ... he’s out at the power station so he’s doing really well for himself, so Dad wants me to get a trade and he wants me to be an electrician” (Webb et al., 2015, p.47).

Another youth attributed their decision to undertake a visual arts diploma to their mother's encouragement and a family habitus in which 'my family are all artists pretty much' (Webb et al., 2015, p. 45). The family habitus was found to be important in several studies:

"A lot of the families don't necessarily value education too well or they have had bad experiences themselves, so they don't necessarily put a high value on it for their kids. Usually, kids will go with what they know because that's all they know. And if mum and dad didn't go to university, then it's not something that's necessarily seen as the first option either" (Webb et al., 2015, p. 47).

In contrast, some studies showed how youth in rural areas were able to develop aspirations which did not conform with their families and community habitus. One four-year college student discussed how hard it is for their family to accept change:

"[T]hey [entire family] just can't let go because every cousin, they've always just stayed. Both of them work in the coal mines ... they have a life, but they didn't change, and they don't understand that I can't go get a job in the coal mine."

"Like my family is pretty much like the coal miner family, like, besides my cousin, like, that's around my age and stuff we're about the only ones that's actually went to college out of my family."

It's hard for them. It really is. It's hard, and I think it's the fact that they [the whole family] had to go through the change too, not only meAnd I think that's being what it is they didn't want to change. They're a lot of these people that don't like change. They've lived in the same house since I've known them. They've not changed inside their house since I've known them (laughing) (Beasley, 2016 p. 142).

The difficulty to go against the norm and expectations of their peers for some youth in rural communities was also examined. In one study a young male described how their friends

would laugh at them for going to college because they already had jobs lined up and were doing what other men in the area have done for generations (Beasley, 2016).

Habitus and Conflict

Some studies found conflicts between the recognition that higher education is important for future employment and the belief that higher education was not necessary for personal success. This often stemmed from being surrounded by people who, despite not having higher education, had achieved success in terms of homes, jobs and families (Bachechi, 2015; Valentine et al., 2017). These studies demonstrated the influence of habitus in choosing not to pursue higher education, even though the youth understood it was important:

“Kim: So, do you think that schooling is necessary to be successful?”

Javier: Absolutely, because you need education. You need to at least keep going forward in life and studying and more information is moving forward in life to me. Like the more you know the better.... you know, because for me I learned a little bit of concrete, how to frame, sheetrock, taping, electrical, this and that, and all that's going to come in handy eventually, sooner or later... one way or another, you know mechanic stuff like that... so... yeah.... Is it required though?..... I don't know, now that I think about it, because I know people that didn't go to school and they're living a good life, they're living a really good life. It's a great bonus I guess, you know. But yeah, I know a guy that ... he doesn't even have papers, let alone schooling, and he's got his own construction company, yeah.... hadn't thought about that one.... I mean, I think there's good things that come from school, but that's not really the same as saying it's required, yeah.... I wouldn't say that it's required. 'Cause now that I think of it, I know a couple of people.... you know, motivations required though. That's required for sure. Like the self-drive, no? The inner drive to do better (Bachechi,

2015, p. 159).

Generational Shift in Family Habitus

Some studies examined how changing rural family habitus and generational shifts have led parents to value and aspire to better educational outcomes for their children than they were afforded themselves (Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Stuart, 2008; Lowe, 2015; Holt, 2012; Corbett, 2007; Camfield, 2011; Valentine et al., 2017; Dahlstrom, 1996; Crivello, 2011; Ames, 2013; Baker & Brown, 2008). This reflects the globalising discourse around the value of higher education, and the need for higher education to disrupt intergenerational poverty that is exacerbated by rural restructuring (Corbett, 2007; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015).

One study describes this shift in a rural farming community in Guinea-Bassau, a father who allowed their son to attend school was teased that they would have to eat their son's school notebooks (instead of rice), however, the father goes on to explain that gradually more sons were allowed to attend school and return to plough rice in the rainy season. These sons went on to get jobs in the city and sent money home, and it was this that caused a shift in the elders thinking:

“The elders, then, began to see that some among them, who had educated sons, were the ones having more rice and they started to give their children freedom to study”
(Temudo & Abrantes, 2015 p. 476).

In many countries, a generational shift in the rural family habitus was found to be occurring as the local rural industries declined, local job opportunities decreased, and unemployment increased. This was found in a rural Alaskan community:

“They can no longer keep up the family tradition,” a number of participants reported:
“This has been in their family; their parents did it, and their parents did it, and now

they're laid off." This urgent reality—"the reality that . . . the unskilled labor market that offers a living wage and benefits has all but disappeared"—is pushing high school students to college; "if you want to move forward," explained a counselor, "chances are at some point you are going to need some education." We promote college, another shared, to "get kids to invest in themselves and say, 'I can do this, and I want more. I don't want to live paycheck to paycheck like my parents have.'" And sometimes there is no other option: students cannot find a job after high school, and so college "is what they end up doing as a default." The decline of local industries is also sending adults to school. The staff of an associate's/bachelor's institution noted the "very, very real and very literal" pressure driving older adults to enrol: "I no longer have the job I had my whole life; I need to do something different, and I may need to have education to help me access it" (Tieken, 2016 p. 212).

Another study describes how local culture in a rural Mexican town has increased the emphasis on the value of education for life success, presenting it as an alternative to hard physical agricultural employment:

"My plan is to continue studying, to have a career. I don't want to work in agriculture because I know how my parents have suffered in the fields. And as my parents have told me, they've given us the opportunity to study so that we have a good quality of life and not suffer the way they did" (Valentine et al., 2017 p. 162).

A study in rural Pakistan revealed that despite both parents being illiterate, they ensured their children were being educated. This family's habitus consisted of a strong positive disposition towards education. This shift in valuing of education, even though it was a struggle financially for the parents, was due to the regret of their own lack of education and

their belief that if they had been educated their lives could have been improved (Arnot & Naveed, 2014).

Choice of Higher Education Institution and Habitus

In some cases, the rural habitus influenced the choice of higher education institution. Some youth from rural areas chose smaller higher education institutions over larger, more prestigious ones because they felt they would fit in better:

“I don't think you experience the kinds of things you do in a larger school. I guess we probably were kind of sheltered, which is good in the fact that it helped me pick a smaller university, which is good, because I wanted to maintain that kind of feel”
(Martin & Duke, 1996 p. 46).

Some students looked for a college with a small town feel similar to their home community and chose a college where they already knew some people. In one study, a student spoke of how important the feel of the college was to them, however, they also stated that no one had influenced them, and it was their decision. This reveals how the participant, to some extent, is unaware of how their rural habitus influenced their choice (Corra, 2015). Habitus in many studies was found to influence youths educational and occupational decisions, as well as, informing their identity to themselves and others (Holt, 2012; Beasley, 2016).

Sub-Theme 4: Economic Capital

Economic capital refers to a person's wealth and access to financial resources. Most studies from a variety of countries included in the systematic review identified finances (economic capital) as being an important factor in youths' development of higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment. It was found that students living in rural communities, who came from families with limited economic capital, faced cumulative disadvantages in terms of being able to access and attain higher education (Tieken, 2016;

Beasley, 2016; Paiva, 2016; Lawrence, 1998; Fleming & Grace, 2017; Hawkins, 2017; Holt, 2012; Del Franco, 2014; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Ames, 2012; Machica & Machica, 2017; Van Hook, 1990; Baker & Brown, 2008; Stuart, 2008; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Doyle et al., 2009; Burnell, 1999; Bachechi, 2015; Webb et al., 2015; Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Seeberg, 2014; Azaola, 2012; Valentine et al., 2017).

Economic Capital and Choice

For some youth in rural communities, their lack of economic capital meant that they felt they did not have a choice to go on to higher education, as they could not afford the costs, such as living away from home and the cost of the degree:

“I think that it’s important that there’s no choices, there’s situations. That’s what leads to what you can do. I think that’s why I find the most, you either can financially move or you can’t financially move and then you’ve got what you can and can’t do based on where you are” (Webb et al., 2015 p. 48)

For others, there was a perception that higher education is only for people who come from wealthy families:

“It is so expensive to go to school and the job market is so terrible in the country now, and I think [parents] just want their kids to be able to stand on their own two feet and financially succeed. The idea of, “Oh, wouldn’t it be great to learn more, learn a foreign language?” That is the playground of the affluent now to be able to do that.” (Tieken, 2016 p. 216)

Additionally, the financial cost and the perception of the cost were found to be significant deterrents for many youths and their families in rural communities:

“I really think the reason for the drop-off in going to college is that they are scared by

the price of higher education today... I believe that the difference, a lot of it, is because of the cost of education in the college. And if you look at it, I think the parents and the students get turned off when they see the large cost. They don't see that at Colby or Bates they might get more on scholarships, and the University of Maine is of course lower in price, but they don't realize there are a lot of extras that aren't there and are in private schools, and I think that turns them off" (Lawrence, 1988, p. 283)

Some parents who aspired for their children to gain higher education were unable to fulfill these aspirations due to a lack of financial resources:

"Lalarukh wanted her younger son to study and get a job, either as lawyer or a judge. She also wanted all her children (including daughters) to 'learn manners of speaking ... and to treat guests well so that people praise her how decent her children are.' But her desire was not fulfilled, 'poverty has killed us'" (Arnot & Naveed, 2014 p. 514).

Economic Capital and Cultural Capital

Several studies linked economic capital with cultural capital, indicating that poorer families also did not have the cultural capital associated with higher education, which is necessary to support their children to succeed. Thus, creating a cumulative disadvantage (Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016). However, even youth from rural areas who come from middle to upper income families, may still have challenges related to economic and cultural capital in succeeding in higher education. These challenges can include not having a family tradition of higher education and also the need to work part-time to afford relocation and living expenses for their studies (Tieken, 2016). Many studies found that youth from rural areas struggled to succeed in higher education due to limited economic capital, as well as the socio-emotional challenges of leaving home (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Hawkins, 2017).

Economic capital, linked with cultural capital and habitus, was also discussed in relation to the choice of higher education institution and degree. It was found that youth from rural areas often did not choose to attend more prestigious institutions or higher status degrees for several reasons. A major factor was financial concerns. Additionally, many did not feel like they would belong at such institutions. Moreover, many students tried to balance the desire for higher education with the fear of debt, resulting in some youth choosing to go to community colleges to study something more practical with a direct link to work (Stuart, 2008; Bachechi, 2015).

One study highlighted that youth in rural areas are often encouraged to choose low-cost, vocational programs, which can offer a clear pathway to a career. However, in contemporary times, this approach has the potential of leaving youth unskilled for future workforce demands (Tieken, 2016). Studies in the USA found that youth were often discouraged from considering higher status degrees, such as a liberal arts degree, due to the higher costs and less direct links to specific careers. This is the case even though it is known that gaining a liberal arts degree at a prestigious institution can offer more work flexibility and higher earnings. This demonstrates how economic concerns can influence higher education decisions and perpetuate higher education outcome inequities in rural areas (Tieken, 2016).

Economic Capital and Gender

Some studies examined the impact of economic capital and gender on higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas. For example, in rural Bangladesh, the decision to support girls' education was found to be tied up in complex ways with finding a marriage partner. The socioeconomic status of the family influenced both educational and marital opportunities. Families from poor backgrounds were found to often prioritise a good marriage, as they have less access to education (Del Franco, 2014). This was also noted in studies in rural Malawi, Ethiopia and India (Frye, 2012; Rao, 2010, Camfield, 2011). In countries, such as Australia, America, Norway, Sweden and Canada, studies found that choice

and opportunity are limited for both males and females because of gender norms and expectations, as well as economic constraints (Beasley, 2016; Dahlstrom, 1996; Webb et al., 2015; Rosvall, 2017; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Shepard, 2004; Hawkins, 2017; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Burnell, 2003; Lowe, 2015; Lambert, 2010; Seyfrit et al., 1998).

In a mining community in rural America, different norms and expectations for men and women, combined with limited options and resources, influenced career choices. Men often went straight into coal mining, where they could earn good salaries without higher education. Women, however, faced more constraints: without higher education, they were limited to low-paying jobs in retail or care-giving work. Consequently, women felt they either had to leave their communities to pursue higher education or stay and either work in a low-paid jobs or get married (Beasley, 2016). A similar situation was observed in rural Norway, where young men enjoyed the rural lifestyle and chose to find traditional employment, despite its decline. Conversely, young women felt that there was a lack of higher-paid employment opportunities and also a lack of activities and interests for them, leading many to choose to leave:

“There is too little to do in the periphery in your spare time -- especially if you do not enjoy knitting in front of the television” (Dahlstrom, 1996 p. 267).

Consequently, a higher number of females than males were found to be leaving the rural Norwegian community to pursue higher education and higher incomes (Dahlstrom, 1996). Notably, the image of rural life was found to underpin the labour market pattern for women living in rural areas:

“there was a greater acceptance of tolerance of the lack of employment opportunities for women while the importance of family, the community and the role of women as mothers ensure that their careers generally assume second place” (Little, 1994, p. 26).

The gendered structure of opportunities in rural areas, and the perceptions of limited economic opportunity for females in their rural community was often found to influence decisions to leave and pursue higher education (Corbett, 2007). The cost of higher education varies across different country contexts; however, a common finding was that a young person from a lower income rural family was less likely to attain higher education if it involved relocation. Limited economic capital was also found to impact a student's academic achievement due to less time to study as they needed to undertake paid work.

Sub-Theme 5: Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital and power were only considered in a very limited number of studies (Bourdieu, 1992; Holt, 2012; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Crivello, 2011). Holt (2012) explored how symbolic power is given to teachers who assess students with grades, but who also then label students as "bright" or "not bright" as "good at school" or "not good at school," which in turn can set a trajectory for that student to either aspire or not aspire to higher education. The study found that the symbolic power of labelling students works powerfully in small rural schools because of the tightknit community networks and because there is a lot at stake for the student (p. 934).

Sub-Theme 6: Emotional Capital

Emotional capital was found to be an emerging theme. Some studies discussed emotional capital as the emotional investment made by teachers and other community members in a young person. This investment helps to build an identity that involves the student and their family imagining themselves going on to higher education for example:

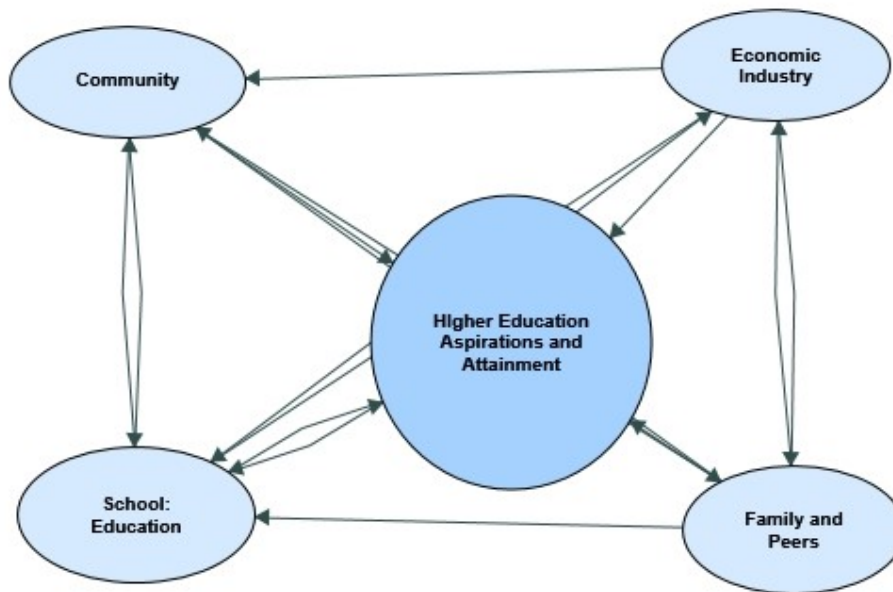
"She believed she was a strong, resilient person with goals and the ability to meet them" (Holt, 2012 p.936).

In summary, the studies found that capital, intersecting with various rural contexts and the family backgrounds of youth in a rural areas, either enabled or constrained their aspirations and attainment of higher education and desired occupation. Additionally, some findings supported Bourdieu's argument (1992) that the habitus of a youth in a rural community is both generative and transportable, depending on the youth's access to capital.

Theme 2: Social and Structural Systems

Figure 5.3

Inter-relationships: Identified Social and Structural Systems Sub-Themes



Youth living in rural areas are part of a bigger picture within several social and structural systems, that they live and interact in. Figure 5.3 illustrates the inter-relationships between the identified social and structural system's sub-themes. Several studies included in the systematic review explored on how youth living in rural areas both influence and are influenced by social and structural systems. These systems include family, community, and local industry, as well as broader social and structural systems such as education systems and

economic conditions. This approach helped to deepen understanding of the factors influencing youths' aspirations and attainment in higher education and their occupational goals.

Sub-Themes:

1. Family and Peers
2. School and Education
3. Community
4. Economic: Industry

Sub-Theme 1: Family and Peers

Several studies examined the interactions between youth, their families, and peers in terms of influence, motivation, expectations, and support, focusing on how these relationships influence higher education and occupational aspirations and attainment (Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Burnell, 1999; Martin & Duke, 1996; Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Elder et al., 1996; Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Paiva, 2016; Seyfrit et al., 1998; Lambert, 2010; Britton, 2011; Hendrickson, 2012; Doyle et al., 2009; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Bachechi 2015; Young et al., 1997; Webb et al., 2015; Holt, 2012; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Cairns, 2013; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Corbett, 2007; Camfield, 2011; Dressel & Startup, 1994; Valentine et al., 2017; Giuliani, Mengel, Paisley, Perkins, Flink, Wongtschowski, & Oliveros, 2017; Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Crivello, 2011; Ames, 2013; McSwan & Stevens, 1995; Fataar, 2010).

Participants in the studies frequently spoke about family members and peers both positively and negatively. They described how these relationships influenced them in a variety of ways, including admiration of family members and peers' attitude and accomplishments in life; a desire to follow in a family members footsteps; or aspirations to be like someone they admire in their family and peer networks (Corra, 2015; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Burnell, 2003; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014):

“She’s a single mother and she raised four kids. Um, I played a lot of sports as a child and so did my other siblings, and she never once told us we couldn’t do it. She always found a way to do it, so she always put that on that you can do it, just put your mind to it, you can do whatever you want to do” (Corra, 2015 p. 96).

Family Influences

Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick (2001) found that the influence of parents and family on post-school choices was very strong. For youth from lower income families, there were several examples where youth were influenced by parents who were doing well despite having no higher education qualifications and earning low incomes (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001). This influence was found to sometimes conflict with the wider societal valuation of educational qualifications, as the youth recognised and valued their families’ hands on skills and ability to make a living in their rural community (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Esveld, 2004; Lowe, 2015). In some studies, youth referred to values that reflected the rural working class that surrounded them, influenced by people who knew how to work hard, act responsibly, get things done and be independent:

“Well, my dad...He goes to work every day at five o’clock in the morning—he doesn’t drink or anything, he doesn’t smoke- just admire that, I guess” (Esveld, 2004 p. 87).

“...and my dad works every day, I mean he doesn’t take a day off” (Esveld, 2004 p. 86).

“my daddy—he taught himself, he didn’t go to college, and he can do a Job better than some people who have been to college and graduated ...he makes sure that everything’s done, he’s a perfectionist. ...” (Esveld, 2004 p.87).

Several studies found the mothers influence to be the strongest in the family. Mothers were found to often encourage education and gaining qualifications more than other family members, even when they did not have educational qualifications themselves (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Corra, 2015; Esveld, 2004; Britton, 2011):

“My mom has helped me with the paperwork and things I will need for college and makes it easier on me.” This participant also said his mother was the greatest influence: “She stresses to me the importance of getting a good education. So, I can get a job and support myself and my family one day” (Britton, 2011 p. 54).

In contrast, other studies found that a mother’s influence to be negative towards higher education due to practical reasons. This sentiment was articulated by a student when asked if their mother talks to them about going to college:

“Not Really, because she said that we have to pay a lot of money” (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, p. 14)

In some studies, fathers were also considered to be a major influence. For some youth, fathers served as role models whose footsteps they wanted to follow. For others, their father’s situation motivated them to achieve more in terms of education, to avoid having the same struggle in life to earn money:

“My dad has only received a high school diploma and has had to work his whole life, just to afford the stuff my family needed. Watching him work all the time for a family of seven, to meet our needs has given me the drive to do what I can to ensure that I will be able to provide for my family when the time comes” (Britton, 2011 p.55).

Further, some studies considered the influence of the extended family, especially the grandparents (Seyfrit et al., 1998; Paiva, 2016; Martinez & Cervera, 2012; Hampton-Garland,

2009; Senior, & Chenhall, 2012). The influence of grandparents on youth from different ethnic backgrounds in rural areas, including First Nations youth, was found to be quite strong. This was found to be particularly true in situations where the youth lived with or close to their grandparents, and community living was the norm (Senior, & Chenhall, 2012; Paiva, 2016; Del Franco, 2014).

Peer Influences

Peer influence was also found to contribute to influencing youths educational and occupational aspirations (Burnell, 1999; Martin & Duke, 1996; Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Lambert, 2010; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Young et al., 1997; Webb et al., 2015; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Corbett, 2007; Dressel, & Startup, 1994). These included peers with the similar post-school aspirations and peers who had different post-school aspirations. The influence of peers with similar post-school aspirations was found to be particularly important for youth living in rural communities who were leaving home either for work or for higher education. Peer influence was found to not only provide encouragement, but also practical support:

“Hannah is also sharing resources with her friend by moving in together. Moving out on her own immediately after graduating, she joined her friend in moving out of state where they both are getting jobs directly and saving on costs by living together”
(Corra, 2015 p.110).

“I’m moving to [a nearby small city] and then I’m getting a job, probably at [a factory]. My best friend's there, she works there, she's going there, so I just thought I’d work with her. We're going to get, like, an apartment or something. [I chose my business sequence in school because] I kind of just wanted school over with and get on with my life...I might go to college someday down the road, but not for a while”
(Burnell, 1999, p75).

Another study, found the importance of peer influence from an early age in shaping youths' higher educational aspirations:

"Growing up, I can't "remember ever thinking I was not going to go to college." So, in the eighth grade when we had to decide whether to follow the academic or the vocational track, "I chose academic..... All of my closest friends [planned to go] to college. And, I would say that..... that desire for knowledge probably cements your friendship better than it does with other people. We saw each other in classes and things like that. I think we probably reinforced each other in academics in school and as far as plans for going on" (Martin & Duke, 1996 p.47).

In contrast, some studies found that there was a negative influence when tensions arose between peers who were aspiring to different post-school paths:

"I have friends that will be like "I can't believe you're going to go away to college and leave me." I have friends that get mad like when I say, "I'm gonna go away to college," they're like, "Why don't you just go to [a local community college]? It's closer and it's at home." And I'm like, "Because you don't really get like the freshman year experience unless you go away." . . . I've heard so many fun things about freshman year at college. I want to go away and experience it for myself and I have friends [that] get mad at me about it. They're like, "Why are you leaving me?" (Ellison et al., 2014 p. 528).

This was found to be emphasised in rural communities where there was a lack of diversity, and so youth were drawing career inspiration from limited networks which could place pressure on them to conform to the norms and expectations within their peer group (Ellison et al., 2014). However, some studies highlighted that even with conflict in peer influence some youth choose their own paths regardless. In the example of one male youth

who wanted to be a nurse—an occupation considered by their peer group as an occupation for females—they persisted because they enjoyed their studies in this area and had a goal, thereby resisting the peer pressure to choose a male occupation such as a mechanic:

“They didn’t realize I can be so much more.”

“My one friend took welding, but he wants to be a history teacher. I don’t know why picked that – he’s really smart but he’s lazy” (Corra, 2015 p.110).

For youth who were unsure about what they wanted to do after school, some studies found that there was a tendency to align their aspirations with those in their peer network:

“I had a friend who just came back for Army National Guard training and said it was fun. Since my friend was doing it, I decided to go along with it (Doyle et al., 2009 p.30).

Another example of aligning with peer network aspirations was revealed when a participant, who wasn’t initially planning to enter the Marines, changed their plans to join when their girlfriend’s cousin enlisted, and talked the participant into joining (Corra, 2015, p.112). When the participant was asked why they changed their plans their response was:

“just figured why not” (Corra, 2015 p.110).

Peer influence was found to be particularly important in shaping higher education aspirations for youth who did not have anyone in their immediate families with higher education qualifications. In one study, a male participant expressed the importance of their mates in the soccer team when asked who is influential in shaping their higher education aspiration:

“Probably from my friends or people at soccer, because they’re always saying that, ‘Oh, yeah, if you go here, these courses are good, these people can help you’ or, ‘This

is where you can get help, ' stuff like that ... I think one is doing ... one's going to be a doctor, another one is in like, health, or something like that, and one's in business management or something like that (Webb et al., 2015 p. 46).

Some studies found another form of peer influence; the perception that youth who stayed in their rural communities were failures (Beasley, 2016; Howley et al., 1996; Holt, 2012; Whitty et al., 2015):

"[I]t doesn't matter where you go as long as you go somewhere ... you're automatically succeeding" (Beasley, 2016 p. 152).

This negative perception from peers was found to influence some youth's decision to aspire to and leave for higher education, even when they would have preferred to stay in their local community (Howley et al., 1996):

"Erm well I think I want to go to a good uni and I just. .. I want to move away, and I want to be more independent I want to meet new people I don't want to stay here I see that as a step back if I stay here because I think I have to make that jump from living at home to living away and doing it myself and living my own life" (Whitty et al., 2015 p. 5).

One study found that youth who had left to go to higher education looked down on their peers who had stayed in the local community and were working in low-income jobs:

"doing what a lot of society would see as shitty jobs... at the end of the day, it's their decision that they've made" (Holt, 2012 p.932).

In some studies, family and peer influence was found to be stronger in rural areas than in urban areas. This is attributed to the current environment of rural restructuring, which has led to job insecurity for many families, and the close-knit nature of rural communities that

limits exposure to diverse influences (Corra, 2015; Corbett, 2007; Beasley, 2016; Hendrickson, 2012).

Family Expectations

Several studies found family expectations to be important in influencing youths' educational and occupational aspirations in rural communities (Hampton-Garland, 2009; Corra, 2015; Esveld, 2004; Hendrickson, 2012; Beasley, 2016). Some studies showed that youth are aware of their parents' expectations for them to achieve a good education and be successful. This awareness was found to have varying effects on their motivation, including both positive and negative. In many studies, it was found that the parents' high expectations for their children was embedded in a desire for them to have a better life than they did (Hendrickson, 2012; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Corra, 2015; Beasley, 2016; Paiva, 2016; Holt, 2012; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Cairns, 2013; Camfield, 2011; Valentine et al., 2017; Giuliani et al., 2017; Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Ames, 2013). Further, it was found that often high educational expectations from family motivated students, who became determined to do well in school so that they didn't disappoint their parents despite the norm of community expectations:

“With me it (education) was important, my mama and daddy wanted me to go, I guess, because I was the only girl, and I was the youngest.”

“Uhn uhn, most of them (youth in community) dropped out (of school), to be honest after you were thirteen you were just out there, just grown.”

“most folks expect us to become drug dealers, go to jail or to get pregnant”
(Hampton-Garland, 2009 p.85).

Another example demonstrates the youth's awareness that their mother's high expectation for them to go on to higher education influenced their choice to work harder to achieve this goal:

“Well, my grades is my number one priority and Mom just always told me, “You need to go to college.” She said, I mean, “It’s the only way you can get a great job” I wouldn’t work hard in school if I wouldn’t have gone to college. I worked so hard all through school so I’m definitely going to college” (Beasley, 2016 p.144).

In contrast it was also found that high expectations from parents could place pressure on their child causing anxiety. In one study, a male participant felt intense pressure from their father to pursue higher education, which was causing them to feel a strain to live up to these expectations, as they were not sure that they wanted to go to college and get a degree:

“I’m just gonna take off” (Corra, 2015 p.84).

Furthermore, some high expectations from parents caused their children to feel resentful, as they felt that the expectations were not realistic and so they could not please their parents:

“Of course, they expected all my siblings to go to college, and of course do well, and to become a doctor or something important...my dad, he always told us, he’d be like, “out of all the kids, I want at least one of you guys to become a doctor”...my dad would always tell us how disappointed he was that none of us were doctors yet, or anything like that. That was just one of his selfish ambitions back when he was young... when we were young. But the expectations were high, my dad always expected us to do good, always expected straight A’s, or just...he always wanted us to surpass our siblings or other kids to always do better. A lot of it was hard for us, because at a young age we kind of really despised our parents, or kind of despised a lot of things. A lot of it was, too, there was a lot of pressure for you to do good again. You felt like you didn’t want to put yourself in a boat of having that pressure on your shoulders” (Paiva, 2016 p.50).

Strength of Influence

The findings from the systematic review suggest that the influence, whether positive or negative, was stronger when the same message or expectation was conveyed by multiple family members and peers. However, different expectations from youth's school and their families were found to create tension (Hendrickson, 2012; Beasley, 2016; Corra, 2015; Corbett, 2007). This situation sometimes occurred when family expectations encouraged children to follow in their footsteps and enter similar local work after finishing school, contrasting with the school's encouragement of aspiring to higher education:

“Taylor explained that he was not certain if he wanted to attend welding school, but he would because of his father: “My dad wants me to do what he does, but I always thought about going to college for so many years and becoming something where I can pretty much sit in an office with a nice, cool air conditioner and make more money, you know?” Taylor concluded that despite these reservations, he was planning to attend the one-year welding program after high school” (Hendrickson, 2012, p. 44).

Another example is from a student whose school is encouraging them to aspire to higher education, however, their parents do not want them to go:

“My parents think that I should drop out and get my GED and take the easy road” (Hendrickson, 2012 p.45).

In one study, a female participant articulates their disappointment that her mother did not support their aspirations for higher education. The participant was aware that times had changed, recognising that there were limited job opportunities for them if they did not have a degree, which was different to the situation when their mother was younger:

“Like some people that were raised back in the olden days believe you work. I mean that you get a job when you get out of school, it’s not important to them that you go to college like my mom is one of those people, yeah well go to school but you need a job first.

“A lot of people used to work at the textile factory or the tobacco factory and could make a good living back then without going to college, but not nowadays...”

(Hampton-Garland, 2009 p.89).

Family Stability

Many studies found that parental support, both practical and emotional, plays a crucial role in shaping aspirations for higher education. Additionally, the family’s emotional and financial stability or instability was shown to influence youths’ aspirations. Some studies found that if a family had experienced financial instability this could contribute to youth needing to work and earn money, resulting in not having the immediate choice to pursue higher education, even if this were their aspiration (Burnell, 2003; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Webb et al., 2015; Fataar, 2010). In one study, a female participant who had experienced their mother’s financial struggles after their parents separated, felt it was necessary to become financially independent before they could consider higher education:

“...need to be able to support myself”

“take it step by step . . . see how it goes after.” (Burnell, 2003 p.77).

A pattern emerged from some of the studies of a greater likelihood of youth to aspire and attain higher education if they had had relatively stable homelives. The studies found that youth from stable and supportive homelives were more likely to foster interests and engage in activities within and outside of their rural communities, which led to increased confidence, an

ability to recognise opportunities, and being able to imagine a future (Webb et al., 2015; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Fataar, 2010).

In many studies, youth spoke of the influences of their families and peers on their higher education aspirations. However, families were found to offer differing levels of support and expectations for their children's education and careers. Youth were found to talk about their educational and occupational aspirations with family members, as well as in the context of what their family members were doing and had (or hadn't) achieved. It was suggested that youth felt most able to aspire and attain higher education when their families were able to provide both emotional and practical support (Webb et al., 2015; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Fataar, 2010).

Sub-Theme 2: Education

Several studies examined the broader social system of education and how this influences youth's higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment in rural communities. These influences included school experiences and perceptions, both positive and negative; access to education; disparities in resources between urban and rural schools; teacher influence; and the role of the school in the community. The broader influence was found to impact significantly on youth's development of educational and career aspirations (Burnell, 1999; Martin & Duke, 1996; Corra, 2015; Stuart, 2008; Staley, 2017; Alleman & Holly, 2013; Hendrickson, 2012; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993; Bachechi, 2015; Guenther, Disbray & Osborne, 2015; Young et al., 1997; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004; Webb et al., 2015; Kenway & Hicky-Moody, 2011; Holt, 2012; Seeberg, 2014; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Rao, 2010; Morrow, 2013; Frye, 2012; Giuliani et al., 2017; Arnot & Naveed, 2014; Crivello, 2011; Ames, 2013; Theron, Liebenberg & Malindi, 2014; Jeffries, 1993).

Rural Schools: Positive Perceptions

Several studies found youth in rural communities to have both positive and negative experiences and perceptions of rural schools. Positive experiences and perceptions tended to

come from positive experiences in classes, feeling of belonging, knowing the teachers and students, and generally have good memories of a friendly and nice environment with likable teachers. Further, youth were found to value the smallness of their schools, the close ties with teachers and students, and the opportunity to participate in extra activities (Shepard, 2004; Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014; Bachechi, 2015; Guenther et al., 2015). The small size of rural schools was shown to contribute to a positive experience as it enabled a more inclusive community feeling, where students found it easy to get involved in clubs, teams, and other school activities, unlike in bigger schools where there was more competition and more selectivity:

“The school's smaller, so it's easier to get involved and, like, be the head of things, because you don't have to compete against everyone. Like, it's, it's easier to get on teams, like sports teams and it's easier to get in clubs and be part of student council or be like, if you're not in it, to at least be a part of it and contribute to it. And it's just, I think that helps a lot with like being responsible and being able to communicate and work with different people, because you have to work with the whole school. Because everyone's involved” (Year 10 student) (Petrin et al., 2014 p.318).

The small size of rural schools was also associated with more positive teacher experiences for some youth:

“I like that it was, um, we had a few enough people that I was able to kind of have a personal sense of belonging with each person, so I kind of know everyone. Um, and all of my teachers were really willing to give personal attention and help to each specific need I had” (Corra, 2015, p.119).

Several studies reported findings of caring and nurturing teachers, who took the time to get to know their students, which contributed to positive school experiences, and was

linked with students' self-perception and desire to achieve (Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Bachechi, 2015; Guenther et al., 2015):

“Javier: Ummm.... support. Just moral support and emotional support at the same time. Like whether I thought about it back then or not, that's what they gave me. You know, like the math teacher pushed me to do better, the English teacher pushed me to do better, you know, the social studies teacher helped me out a lot too. You know, I don't know if it was me specifically, but I felt like all the teachers wanted me to graduate, they wanted me to go.... you know?”

Kim: So, did that belief make you want to be what they believed you were going to be?

Javier: Yeah, absolutely” (Bachechi, 2015 p.101).

“I loved the fact that the teachers were so.... back then it seemed... well, there's still a lot of teachers like the way there was in the past... but my teachers were really all about the students. I felt comfortable with them when they were teaching me. I felt like I could achieve everything they were teaching me. I.... it felt comfortable... and not that I didn't know anything, and if I didn't, then they would help me” (Shepard & Marshall, 2004, p.81).

In several studies, the teachers were found to do extra work in their own time with few resources, as they wanted to give each of their students the best opportunity to succeed (Stuart, 2008). Additionally, there was often a sense of history and community, as many youths had other family members attending the school, as well as previous generations of their family members having attended the school so there was a feeling on belonging, safety and family (Bachechi, 2015; Shepard & Marshall, 2000).

Rural Schools: Negative Perceptions

In contrast, there were also negative perceptions and experiences for students in rural schools, particularly regarding the small size, which often results in fewer resources, fewer

extra-curricular activities, and less subject choices available in high school (Martin & Duke, 1996; Stuart, 2008; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993; Bachechi, 2015; Young et al., 1997; Holt, 2012; Monk, 2007). Several studies found that participants reported having less choice and access to higher level and more specialised subjects than their urban counterparts:

“When I was in high school, I didn't have much flexibility in what I could take. I felt like it was a set route and then you're ready to graduate.” I would want my daughter to have the opportunity to take courses that interest her” (Martin & Duke, 1996; p.50).

Many studies found that rural schools had limitations on what senior school courses they could offer, which sometimes impacted on a student being able to access a higher status degree course. In one study, students wishing to study an engineering degree experienced challenges, as their rural school was unable to provide the background knowledge in mathematics. As a result, they were unable to go into an engineering course straight after school (Webb et al., 2015). In addition, another case study reinforced this challenge as it was noted that students completing their senior schooling had fewer courses to select from at the advanced levels, and that advanced maths and science (physics, trigonometry and calculus) were absent from the school offerings (Esveld, 2004).

Youth were found to worry about the disadvantages of living in a rural community, in particular about their academic preparation and often referred to the lack of diversity and rigor in course offerings in high school:

“There's not many options. There's some classes that they call Independent Studies... I'm in a class that a teacher can't even really help with...there's a math class and there's no one person that actually specializes in math” (Lowe, 2015 p.16).

Additionally, several studies found that, in general, there was a lack of extra-curricular activities and different experiences on offer to youth in rural schools:

“Um, yeah, I feel like being in a small school kind of um dampened my opportunities as far as... getting to go places and... seeing things and that type of thing. Would have liked to have gone to maybe a little bit of a bigger school” (Corra, 2015 p.118).

Stratification of Schools

Stratification of the schooling system was found in various countries, including Australia, Bahamas, China, America, India, and Peru. Some studies found that schools in rural areas had more limited resources and funding than urban schools; whilst also having to service a greater diversity of students, in terms of interests and needs. This resourcing disparity was found between rural and urban areas, as well as within rural areas (private schools vs public schools) (Alloway et al., 2004; Seeberg, 2014). Additionally, it was found that teachers in rural areas often had limited training in certain specialised subjects which limited the school curriculum offerings. The limited funding and training was found to impact on youths’ access to different experiences and learning opportunities, which ultimately influenced their educational and occupational aspirations and attainment. One example is from rural China:

“As the gap between urban and rural education grows, the general policy, tied to hukou, of ‘going to the nearby school’ results in tremendous advantages for urban children in terms of educational opportunities and resource attainment relative to their rural counterparts” (Seeberg, 2014 p.696).

Another study from India emphasised that even though the poorest had gained access to education, these schools were not of a high quality, especially in the rural areas. Notably, questions were raised that the inadequate funding and resourcing of these schools, for the

poorer students in rural areas, was being done to perpetuate the existing social hierarchies (Rao, 2010). Studies in countries such as, Australia, Canada, and America also highlighted a lack of government funding in rural schools which often resulted in a lack of facilities:

“I didn’t like, and this is not anyone’s fault, but I wish.... like for instance, comparing ourselves to La Cueva [a public high school in a prosperous area on the eastside], um, you look at their gym, their baseball field, their basketball court, and it’s just phenomenal, I mean they have this state of the art equipment and.... and we could only succeed so much with what we had, and maybe part of it has to do with living in the South Valley and having low income families and stuff like that.... so, I don’t like that aspect of it.... ’cause I wish I would’ve went to a school that had more funds to just get more better equipment to prepare me better... not only education-wise, but also as far as sports... and just everything, just in general you know?” (Esveld, 2004 p. 76).

Another student living in a rural community in Australia summed it up:

“For people – like kids living in all areas – to do better than metropolitan people is hard, and it’s due to access to facilities, teachers and, like, variety. Parts of everything we’ve said. (New South Wales Year 12 Student) “(Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p. 24).

As well as rural government schools being found to be less well-resourced and funded than urban schools, in several studies, youth, teachers, and family members were also found to believe that urban schools provided a higher quality education than rural schools:

“We need a different math program. Get us on the same math program that all the other schools around the country are on so we could get into college easily” (Lowe, 2015, p. 16).

Higher Education and Career Advice

Limited resources were also found to affect students' access to career advice and higher education. Information and preparation for students regarding higher education and careers was found to often be limited, with a tendency to be offered only in senior high school (Burnell, 1999; Corra, 2015; Tieken, 2016; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Britton, 2011; San Antonio, 2016). This lack of guidance and advice was found to be particularly impactful for youth who did not have higher education knowledge and experience in their close networks:

Kim: What about things that you didn't learn that you really wish you had learned?

Audrey: Um..... I wish I would've I wish I would've learned how important that foundation was - high school - and I wish I would've known... I wish somebody would have told me..... you know, like now with my little brother I really try to encourage him and..... and I wish somebody would've told me, "look if you do really well in high school, then you can get a full ride scholarship and not have to pay a penny out of your pocket for college." And I put myself through college, so I wish someone would have just sat down with me and been like.... you know, "you really need to try hard right now because it can affect how you do in college, it can get you college paid for." And no one really did. My parents just said, "you're going to college. You're going to go." But that was it, and I don't even think they knew how to prepare for college 'cause they didn't go themselves (Bachechi, 2015, p. 212)

Further, some studies noted that the advice given to youth often influenced their trajectory along a conventional route (Kenway & Hicky-Moody, 2011). For example, it was found in a variety of studies that advice given from teachers and career advisors tended to encourage youth in rural communities to choose a local community college. This was particularly evident in several studies in the USA, for students from lower income

backgrounds (Stuart, 2008; Bachechi, 2015; Alleman & Holly, 2014; Burnell, 2003; Nelson, 2016).

In addition, several studies also found that youth living in rural communities were less likely to have visited a university or college campus due to travel constraints of time, distance, and cost (Stuart, 2008; Doyle et al., 2009). Coupled with a lack of information and guidance students were found to be ill-informed when they were making decisions in relation to higher education and careers (Pasztor, 2018; Ball & Vincent, 1998). Even when there were careers services available, often youth did not access the service effectively. In part, because they did not feel that it would be of any help to them, didn't feel comfortable seeking help, but also due to careers teachers being part-time (Burnell, 1999; Corra, 2015; Stuart, 2008):

“Jim didn't think his counselor was available to help him or students like him: I always thought that I don't know, I didn't know if he could do anything for people who were just going to work after ... high school. I always just thought he was there for people going to college” (Burnell, 1999, p. 76).

Furthermore, tension was identified between careers advisors, who were primarily focusing on students aspiring to go on to higher education, and students who were not aspiring to higher education. Some students felt that they did not get much guidance as their plans for different jobs or careers were not valued as highly, and that there was a lack of understanding as to why they had chosen a different pathway:

“Claire wrote: when I was sitting in the guidance office my sophomore year, they were trying to persuade me onto “the path,” the path of a 4 year college. When I told her about my plan to go to school to be a licensed cosmetologist, she didn't exactly approve. So, there it was. The only option they wanted me to have. Her words were, “that's fine ‘n’ all if that's what you think you want to do.. but with your grades and intelligence you need to have a college back up plan.” Does that mean college bound

students are supposed to have a technical back-up plan if it doesn't work out for them? Nope, of course not.

I'm a very realistic person, so I have the worries and fears of not succeeding and not making a good living for myself, especially in an economy like this. But multiple people in my family are in the career that I want to be in and are very successful, like my dad for example" (Staley, 2017 p. 28).

A small number of studies referred to a dualism discourse in rural schools. One school discourse identified was that youth need to leave their rural community to pursue higher education and a career if they want to be successful (Corbett, 2007; San Antonio, 2016). However, other studies found that youth heard the opposite, and teachers were encouraging them to stay in their communities (Holt, 2012; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009).

Teacher Influences

In contrast to the positive findings of teachers in rural schools being caring and nurturing, some studies found negative perceptions and experiences. This was due to a number of factors including: teachers not understanding the rural communities they were teaching in; high teacher turnover resulting in lack of investment in relationships between students and teachers; and perceived inadequate teaching (Martin & Duke, 1996; Stuart, 2008; Staley, 2017; Hendrickson, 2012; Guenther et al., 2015; Holt, 2012; Theron et al., 2014; Lowe, 2015):

"One of the bad things about the school is that the electives are really limited to what the teachers can do. And a lot of the time what happens is that teachers move up here and discover that they don't like it and move again (Lowe, 2015 p. 16).

Several studies found concern from youth, teachers, and parents in regard to the recruitment and retention of teachers, as well as the level of teacher turnover, and the

availability of specialist teachers. These factors were shown to compound on the overall quality of teaching compared to the quality of teaching available in urban areas:

Look at the teachers we've got now. They obviously don't like to come [here].

Because we haven't got much"

"It's true. Yeah it's true. We get the worst teachers up here. Seriously, they hand out sheets to you and don't explain it.

My social teacher is an arts teacher and she's never done it at uni. She used to be a substitute and now she's a teacher for S and E and Health. And she's not qualified in those areas.

There's teachers teaching subjects they're not even qualified for because it is so difficult to get teachers" (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p.57).

Findings also linked students' negative experiences of their teachers to the negative perception and low expectations that they felt from both their teachers and the wider society toward them and their community:

"Yeah like the South Valley schools, they get all the teachers that the other schools don't want. And by the time the teachers get there, they just don't give a shit. And they don't care about teaching" (Bachechi, 2015 p. 159).

"I think.... that they just don't..... and to a point I really think that it is partly that the teacher's just don't care, because I think a lot of the teachers that kind of get put there - for lack of a better word - kind of feel like, "you're a South Valley kid, you're going to fail anyway, so what does it matter? I could work my butt off and you're still going to fail, so....." (Bachechi, 2015 p. 159).

There were mixed findings regarding the strength of influence of teachers on youths' higher education and occupational aspirations and attainment. Some studies found that

teachers had little influence (Paiva, 2016), whilst others found teachers to be a key influencer (Holt, 2012). Some studies, in countries where access to education for poorer or marginalised children has been historically problematic, emphasised teachers positive influence on students as people who were able, through education, to assist them with breaking intergenerational poverty and have a better future. For example, as this quote from a study conducted in South Africa demonstrates:

“School—a place where my future is going to be produced. ... I would like to thank my primary and secondary teachers for taking me to the light. If it wasn’t for them, I would have been a futureless child with no idea of what the world has for me”
(Theron et al., 2014 p. 259)

Curriculum Disconnect

Furthermore, a few studies found there was a disconnect for some students between the curriculum, perceived to be urban-centric, and their lives, which could lead to reduced engagement in learning (Hendrickson, 2012; Lowe, 2015; Corbett, 2007). Hendrickson (2012) found that some students resisted school engagement as a mechanism to protect their rural culture, and along with a small number of other studies, suggested that place-based learning which reinforces rural community and family values would be beneficial (p.47).

Rural Higher Education Institutions

Lack of local higher education institutions was a major concern for youth living in rural areas, who often have to move away from home to pursue higher education. This distance is particularly concerning in countries where rural populations face greater isolation and higher financial and time costs to access urban areas, such as Australia, America, Canada, and India. Limited access to higher education within these communities was found to constrain the development of educational aspirations rural youth, as they face social, emotional, and financial barriers to relocating to urban areas for higher education (Fleming &

Grace, 2017; Tieken, 2016; Corbett, 2007; Esveld, 2004).

The struggle to balance immediate financial and emotional concerns against the long-term benefits was evident in many studies. A lack of access to higher education for students in rural communities strongly influenced their post-school decisions—whether to pursue higher education or find local education or work opportunities—a factor that did not affect youth in urban areas to the same extent (Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Fleming & Grace, 2017; Corbett, 2007; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016):

“There are things I’d like to do, but I’m not sure, you know? I’d like to be a marine biologist, you know, so I could study whales and dolphins. That’d be really cool. But I ain’t doin’ so good in school right now. And it’s, like, really expensive to go away so you gotta’ be sure” (Corbett, 2007 p. 786).

Some studies explored the limited provision of higher education in regional areas, particularly highlighting how this allowed students who could not leave their rural areas due to family and work commitments to participate in higher education and contribute to local community development (Ellis et al., 2008). However, some studies noted that although many regional campuses have improved local offerings enabling students to remain at home and in their communities, the course offerings were often limited, which did not fully mitigate the disadvantage associated with a lack of higher education provision in rural communities (Coates & Edwards, 2009; Wilks & Wilson, 2012).

Sub-Theme 3: Community

The community environment, including interactions with peers and adults, significantly influences the development of youths’ higher education and occupation aspirations. This influence can be especially important when in a small rural community. The studies in this systematic review revealed various patterns of relationships within communities that can either enhance or constrain the development of aspirations. Several

studies specifically examined how individual youths engage within the social realms of their communities.

Findings from a variety of studies showed that contexts, values, beliefs, and social and cultural factors are interrelated components of a social system that influences youth development (Smithmier, 1994; Beasley, 2016; Lambert, 2010; Del Franco, 2014; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Cox et al., 2014; Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011; Shepard, 2004; Whitty et al., 2015; Fataar, 2010; Martin & Duke, 1996; Howley, et al., 1996; San Antonio, 2016; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Rosvall, 2017; Esveld, 2004; Ganss, 2016; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Temudo, & Abrantes, 2015; Corra, 2015; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Doyle et al., 2009; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993; Bachechi, 2015; Good & Willoughby, 2007; Corbett, 2007; Philipsen, 1993; Hampton-Garland, 2009).

Belief Systems, Values, Norms and Expectations

Research indicates that the influence of small rural communities on youths educational and occupational aspiration is complex. Different community belief systems, values, norms, and expectations can contribute to internal conflicts as youth negotiate their post school aspirations. Some studies described rural communities as having strong traditions and legacies. Youth who choose post-school paths different from the traditional norms, such as pursuing higher education and leaving their communities, were often seen as resisting cultural legacies and rejecting community values. Conversely, those who chose to take more traditional post school paths were seen as committing to the community which was highly valued (Corbett, 2007; Beasley, 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

“[T]hey [entire family] just can’t let go because every cousin, they’ve always just stayed. Both of them work in the coal mines ... they have a life, but they didn’t change, and they don’t understand that I can’t go get a job in the coal mine” (Beasley, 2016 p. 142).

In one study, youth reported that the traditional values held by their community made people devalue higher education, viewing university as unnecessary and a bad thing. This perception led the youth to rejecting the community's values and beliefs:

“Some people think that it doesn't make a difference if you go to school, [they'd] rather have it if you just worked hard, then try something else . . . or they don't believe that you have to or that you even should. To some degree, reputation and respect in the community is your highest [priority] . . . is almost valued higher than, than level of education” (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016 p. 147).

Consequently, internal conflicts for youth were found in relation to deciding if higher education was for them or not (Beasley, 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). In particular, because of the perception that youth leaving put the community at risk, and so there was a pressure to maintain the social norm of the community:

“like in [town], you're expected to be married at 18 and have kids by, by the time you're 20, like, and college is weird in [town] like, for most people” (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016 p. 148).

In studies conducted in Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia, and China it was found that there was a similar tension between youths' hopes and aspirations, to become independent through higher education, and their sense of conforming to social constraints. Various community members, such as, village leaders, elders, relatives, and neighbours strongly maintained traditional values and norms of behaviour through hegemonic discourse (Del Franco, 2014; Morrow, 2013; Camfield, 2011).

Several studies reported that youths received mixed messages and contradictions from their communities. Some community members viewed pursuing higher education as positive, while others did not think it was necessary (Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Friesen & Purc-

Stephenson, 2016; Smithmier, 1994; Lambert, 2010; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Beasley, 2016; Ganss, 2016). These studies highlighted the tensions between the notion of individual choice to pursue higher education, and community pressures to stay and conform, significantly impacting the development of higher education aspirations.

Bajema, Miller and Williams (2002) explains that the group is a “powerful anchor that limits the level of aspiration, particularly when the group is cut off from other groups... people tend to use others who are similar or have similar levels of ability as a source of social comparison” (p.62). Across the studies, a strong sense of community and belonging was consistently reported. where community members, including youth, shared a belief system, values, norms, and a sense of connectedness to the rural area. This was apparent even when youth expressed conflicting or negative emotions towards their community (Lambert, 2010; Del Franco, 2014; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). In several studies, youth narratives conveyed conflicting emotions towards their rural communities, highlighting positives such as a sense of community and belonging, while also noting how this could also feel constraining:

“a lot of people, they’re very closed minded” Corra, 2015 p.147).

The complex push and pull emotions for youth towards their communities was evident as often they valued their close knit traditional rural communities, yet at the same time disliked the slowness to change and lack of acceptance of new ways of being and doing (Holt, 2012; Corra, 2015; Beasley, 2016). This slowness to change, particularly in a time of rural restructuring, was found to add to the complex navigation of developing higher education aspirations for youth in rural communities.

Sub-Theme 4: Industry and Economic Systems

The impacts of globalisation and restructuring of rural economies was a common themes across many studies in relation to youths’ higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment (Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Elder et al., 1996; Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Lowe, 2015; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Alleman &

Holly, 2013; Howley et al., 1996; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Senior & Chenhall, 2012; Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Funnell, 2008; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Corbett, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Whitty et al., 2015; Azaola, 2012; Crivello, 2011; Ames, 2013; McSwan & Stevens, 1995; Fataar, 2010; Van Hook, 1990; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993).

Local Employment Structures

The economic context of rural areas varied across the studies, and each context was found to differently influence youth's future aspirations for future education and work. The awareness of changing times and economic realities was evident in youth narratives. These narratives reflected how youths see themselves not only within their local communities but also in relation to the wider society. Many youths considered their futures within the local context of rural changing economies and local employment structures (Tieken, 2016; Lowe, 2015; Baker & Brown, 2008; Cox et al., 2014; Corra, 2015).

In several studies, the changing rural economy was a motivating factor for youths' career goals and higher education aspirations. This was found particularly in rural communities where the traditional occupations, which did not require higher education, were in decline with limited employment opportunities. In some studies youth were aware that they would not be able to continue with their family's traditional occupation, as there were limited employment opportunities for unskilled labour, and understood that they needed higher education to have better life prospects (Tieken, 2016; Lowe, 2015; Baker & Brown, 2008):

“it was automatically assumed that I was going to university because ... in B— [a village mainly dependent on a dying slate industry] at that time, what else do you do?” (Baker & Brown, 2008 p. 65).

“there was that feeling that you should get an education to avoid the pit, avoid the quarry” (Baker & Brown, 2008 p.65).

Several studies found that youth who stayed in their rural environments stated that

they had few job opportunities, and most who left said it was because they didn't want to remain in low paying jobs for the rest of their lives in the local area:

“I’m only a year [spent away at college] and I can already tell you from the friends that I have that didn’t go to college, they’re working for the towns and at Dunkin’ Donuts and applying to Shaw’s [local grocery store] so that they can get 40 hours a week. And some of them have children.... If you don’t go on to school, when you graduate high school, there’s nothing to do here. You would have to leave the area to find something to do and really make something of yourself unless you’re extremely lucky and have a friend of a friend who gets you in a decent job.... We don’t have anything [here for work]. I mean, we have seasonal motels or tourist attractions ... but you wouldn’t be able to get a decent paying job at some restaurant.... So, for them to stay here and try and make it, it’s not gonna work” (Cox et al., 2014 p. 178).

In contrast, some studies found that the lack of local employment opportunities did not motivate youth towards higher education if they wanted to remain in their community. This was because there were no local employment opportunities available that would reward having a degree (Beasley, 2016; Baker & Brown, 2008). Further, youth were often found to have been working in low paying jobs such as waitressing, farm work, retail since high school. These experiences were found to influence the high value placed on paid work and the prioritisation of immediate employment over higher education (Corra, 2015).

Mining Economies

Different rural communities were found to have experienced varying effects of rural restructuring: while some communities have experienced economic growth, many others have experienced a decline in local industry and employment. Studies found that these economic conditions significantly influence youth’s higher education and occupational aspirations (Lowe, 2015; Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Corra, 2015; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Cox et

al., 2014). In some studies of rural mining towns, youths, particularly males, tended not go on to higher education due to the high salaries offered locally, and as a consequence placed less emphasis on achieving academically in school (Beasley, 2016; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009). This was found to be true in both declining and thriving mining towns economic contexts:

“There was smart people that decided to go the coal mines and I guess that’s more like, just like a family history thing. That they were raised by the coal mines, and they just felt that they should just stick with it and not really make a difference. I mean some that didn’t go could have probably went but they really didn’t apply themselves good enough in high school” (Beasley, 2016 p. 143).

However, there was recognition from youth in declining mining contexts that due to the decrease in mining jobs this popular post school option need to change, and youth and their families would need to consider higher education (Beasley, 2016). One study conducted in an economically thriving mining town found mixed influences on youth’s higher education aspirations, both towards pursuing higher education and then returning to gain a higher salaried position in the mines. In particular, some youth in these areas were encouraged to study sciences and pursue higher education to become engineers, or other science-related roles within the mining industry (Young et al., 1997). It was also found that many youths chose to go straight into a well-paid job in the mines after leaving school:

“I think the nature of the industry that’s going on up here has an enormous effect on kids. Just the money within the town, I think Karratha income per capita is one of the highest of any shire in Australia. We’ve got the highest boat ownership per person in Australia. And we’ve got the highest four-wheel drive ownership per person in Australia as well. So, to be able to own those things, you have to have a fair bit of

money and I think the money in the town is very important and might affect students' aspirations. And that can be positive. I mean a lot of kids who want to go to study actually want to come back because they know that the money here is very good. Having said that, I also think that the employment prospects for teenagers are far higher than any other towns or places that I have been to, and that's good. But it might also mean that some students will settle for what's here" (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p. 57)

The availability of jobs that offer good starting salaries in the mines in towns that are economically doing well was found to be appealing to male youth; however, there were fewer opportunities for females (Beasley, 2016; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993). Another finding regarding economically thriving rural mining towns concerned the nature of employment: in some towns dominated by the mining industry, this consisted mainly of casual or contract employment, with little long-term guaranteed work. The nature of these employment structures can lead rural communities to become transient, with many fly-in, fly-out workers or outsiders who go to the rural community specifically to work in the mines (Alloway et al, 2004). This also causes rents and housing prices to escalate, making it difficult for locals not earning a mining salary to enter the housing market.

In contrast, some economically declining mining towns, which had high unemployment rates, increasing levels of poverty and little prospects for the future, were found to influence some youth to seek higher education and employment options outside of their rural community:

"We'll be leaving [here] because you don't really want to stay around here.

"Well, you don't. You have no future in [this town]. You've got to be pretty lucky if you get a decent job in the mines or something, as an apprentice or something.

(Queensland Year 10 Students)

“If you want opportunities you’re not going to find them here, so you’ve got to go away.

“Well, if you don’t get enough education in [this town] you don’t go anywhere. You stay here for the rest of your life pretty much. Because when we had the mines, they were good jobs. Like you got paid good money. The boys left school to work in the mines and the girls got their dads to open up hairdressing studios and stuff. Or they became nurses or teachers.

“You’ve got to have goals for the future because a lot of people that are dropping out, are dropping out because they don’t have goals. But most of the people that want to leave [here] have wanted it for a long time. They said, ‘This is what I want to do with my life and I’m getting out of [this town].’ And they’re working towards it. (New South Wales Year 11 Students)” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2004 p.58).

This economic context was also associated with youth having a depressed vision of their future and disengagement with education. Examples of intergenerational poverty were found in these areas. One teacher in a declining mining town in Australia explained:

“If I was to look at students in the early '90s I would say many of those kids still thought that they would be able to get some sort of job somewhere, and their attitude to school was that they could see some purpose in what they were doing, and therefore they would work hard, etc. These days I find there are very, very few students who have any clear concept of where they might be going with their lives and what they might do, very few. That inevitably spins off into the classroom because if you don't see a purpose in life, or any hope in your life, what's the purpose of being here at school? I'm not sure if that is different in a big city or not but it is blatantly obvious here that there really isn't anything for them to do locally, to make it big time. So why would you aim to make it big time? (South Australia)” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009

p. 57).

Furthermore, in recent times, new types of mining and industry development have commenced in economically declining rural areas, causing conflict and tensions within the rural community. One such example is the unconventional gas development in the Marcellus region in America. Tensions are found between the desire for economic development and employment in the community and the risks to local social and environmental resources (Schafft & Biddle, 2015). The immediate benefits of offering youth employment in their local area are offset by the reality that the work may be only for the short-term and come at the expense of youth going on to higher education (Corbett, 2007; Schafft & Biddle, 2015).

Farming Economies

Globalisation and rural restructuring of agricultural have led to a decline in traditional farming, with a focus on corporate, high-tech farming companies. This shift has resulted in economic decline for many rural farming communities. Small and medium-sized farms have struggled to compete with large multinational corporations, with many attempting to survive by diversifying their business:

"We had a Grade-B dairy when I was growing up and then they stopped buying the B-milk, and we had to change our strategy for money making and go to alternate things. We raised beef cattle and tobacco and had the dairy. "There was a man up the road" that had an egg business" (Martin & Duke, 1996 p. 151).

Many farms have gone out of business, resulting in a decline in local employment in agriculture, and businesses that relied on local farmers have also closed. Living in an economically declining rural farming community was found to impact on youth's higher education and occupational aspirations in various ways. Studies found that some youth who grew up in farming families were emotionally tied to the rural way of life and wanted to

continue farming. However, they also understood that farming had changed, making it difficult to make a living in the same way:

“It's a farming community, and the farming is changing, big time. You just don't make a living off your farm anymore like you used to. But these boys are still raised country)-a big [percentage], probably 50% or better wouldn't it be?-at this school u.re farm kids. I mean, you know there's several (she laughs), like the boy that got the job, job at John Deere. Like he said, he took a lot of ag shop) that sort of classes. That's what's gonna work for him; you're not gonna stick him over in Iowa City, you know, in a four year university. It just isn't gonna work, that's my opinion. There's a lot of them-there's no reason for them to go on because it's not what they're going to do” (Esveld, 2004 p. 98).

Additionally, there appeared to be a sense that higher education would be needed, but would be a financial burden:

“When we were in the lower grades and they were asking what you wanted to be when you grew up, I always figured I would be an Indian rather than a chief. I wanted to stay on the farm, but financially, it's impossible.” I realized that; “probably around fourteen or fifteen, especially as a woman. Actually, I knew it all along but still I dreamed, because you need to stay on the farm to keep it going.

“As I grew older and entered high school, “I didn't really know what I wanted to do I took all of the academic courses in preparation for college. But I always knew it would be a financial burden on my parents. I didn't want to go. I knew in order for me to go, they were going to have to cut timber and I didn't want that to happen. I wanted to save that for their retirement.” If I had really wanted to go, I might have found out about scholarships or financial aid and loans. I think some of my friends found out about them through the guidance counselor. I ended up “staying on the farm until the

crops were in, the silage was in the silo, and then sought work in Richmond” (Martin & Duke, 1996 p. 152).

Further, teachers and parents observed that the economic decline of farming demotivated some youth regarding their post-school future aspirations, as they saw the agricultural base of the economy erode without many alternative opportunities to replace it:

“I guess I have a vested interest [in the community]. Because I know what our community has been, I know where it's going down, and I say there is a part that's going, it's a going down part because our community was all agriculture based. We were [a large agricultural area], and no agriculture is here now. And when the ag and... the agriculture started going downhill, the farmers lost their money, they lost their farms. The kids lost their summer jobs. I will attribute a lot of that lack of farming to them doing drugs now” (Corra, 2015 p. 149).

Findings from some non-English speaking countries highlighted different focuses and impacts of declining rural agricultural economics on youths' educational and occupational aspirations (Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Giuliani., 2017; Ames, 2013; Rao & Hossain, 2012). In some countries, where access to the urban areas was opening up due to better transport and employment opportunities, there was a perception among some youth that agriculture was hard work for poor wages. This perception motivated some youth to either find work in the city or to further their education (Rao & Hossain, 2012). However, access to urban areas was found to be limited for some rural families and youth who experienced persistent poverty; yet this constraint appeared to motivate and inform an understanding that education was needed to move out of poverty, even though access to education continued to be problematic (Ames, 2013; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015).

Several studies presented narratives of families diversifying their livelihoods and

sources of income, for example, in Peru, 50% of rural families combine agriculture and non-agricultural income, and these families are less poor than those that rely solely on agricultural, and have better living conditions (Ames, 2013). A variety of studies emphasised that higher education is needed not only for income diversification, as without it only low-paid agricultural work is available, but also to gain the agriculture training and modern farming knowledge as ecosystems continue to be affected by climate change (Ames, 2013; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015).

Rural vs Urban Economic Development

Some studies identified the uneven economic development between urban and rural areas (Giuliani et al., 2017; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Ames, 2013; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Camfield, 2011). The centralisation of commerce and employment into urban areas were found to exacerbate the economic divide between urban and rural areas (Elder & Conger, 2000; Dahlstrom, 1996; Corbett, 2007; Esveld, 2004). Studies included in the systematic review found varying impacts of the economic context on youths educational and occupational aspirations; reflecting different rural economic contexts, histories, policies, and cultures, as well as, different individual level factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and wealth. The one common theme was that youths post-school futures were intimately bound to the economic context, including employment structures and opportunities, of their rural communities.

In summary, the literature revealed how youth navigate structures of opportunity available to them in their rural communities to inform their future aspirations, within family, school, community, and economic contexts (Furlong & Cartmel, 1995).

Theme 3: Risk

Figure 5.4

Inter-relationships: Identified Risk Sub-Themes

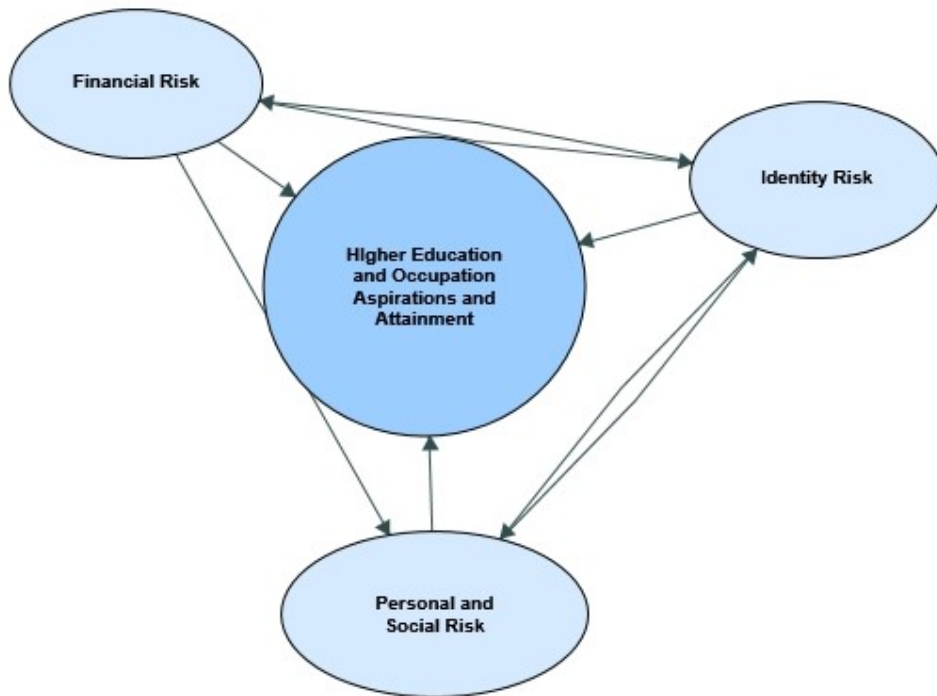


Figure 5.4 illustrates the inter-relationships between the identified risk sub-themes. Several studies included in the systematic review highlighted student narratives relating to perceived risks that were influencing their educational, occupational, and residential aspirations and attainment. Youth living in rural communities may have higher education aspirations, however, decide not to pursue higher education due to the perceived risks, which involve decisions to leave home and embark on a 3-year degree (Raciti, 2019). Financial risk and personal fears were constant themes across several studies, whereas social, identity risk, and future work risks appeared to be emerging focus.

Sub-Themes:

1. Financial Risk
2. Personal and Social Risk
3. Identity Risk

Sub-Theme 1: Financial Risk

Financial risk was an overarching theme across most studies, regardless of the country context. Several studies considered the financial costs associated with going to university for youth in rural communities and the concerns potential students, their teachers, and family had about the affordability of moving out of home to go to university (Corra, 2015; Nithya, 2010; Tieken, 2016; Stuart, 2008; Wilks, & Wilson 2012; Baker & Brown, 2008; Cox et al., 2014; Friesen, & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Whitty et al., 2015; Bachechi, 2015). Financial constraints and the worry about money was evident in several studies:

“perfectly happy to go ... as long as I can afford it. ..” (Whitty et al., 2015, p.21).

One study found that concern with money was also evident in primary school aged children:

“I think what might prevent me from doing this is money because we mightn’t have enough money to be able to send me to university” (Year 6 student) (Wilks & Wilson, 2012 p.86).

School staff emphasised that the financial cost of going to university is often a main concern from their students and their student’s families:

“And, um, but I think that’s probably the biggest fear is just the money, the money part of it” (Corra, 2015 p. 156).

Fear of Debt

A few studies highlighted how some teachers contended with the tensions of encouraging students to pursue higher education against the possibility that students may get into debt, not finish their degrees, and consequently end up in an even worse financial position:

“But she couldn’t help wondering: “Are we setting her up? Are we setting her up to get into debt and to not finish? I don’t know the answer to that.” The reality of debt-laden, degreeless youth returning home after a few months or years of college served to temper the optimism of participants’ college-going message.” (Tieken, 2016 p. 213).

The financial costs of moving out of home and the costs of a degree were shown to be major concerns for students in rural communities. Additionally, these students were shown to often have a lack of accurate knowledge about financial assistance and the actual costs of a degree:

“It cost a whole lot of money. Thousands of dollars, not single digits. I don’t really know.” (Stuart, 2008 p. 76).

In countries, such as America, where the cost of a university degree varied depending on the institution, the “choice” of a higher education institution was constrained by the student’s financial situation. For many young people living in rural communities choosing a lower cost institution was appealing as a realistic option, however, often they did not understand the longer-term benefits of attending a more prestigious institution and gaining a higher status degree. Some studies highlighted students’ fear of debt as they tried to work out if higher education was a worthy investment, as one teacher explained:

Cost of education, particularly tertiary. If they have drive can achieve any work goals. Would prefer they did not start work life with a huge HECS debt if little career prospects” (Wilks & Wilson, 2012 p. 86).

This fear of debt was reflected in youth’s decisions to attend a local community college or an out of state higher education institute (Bachechi 2015; Stuart, 2008):

“I know the cost to attend the local two year college is \$8000. It is \$22,000 to attend the Nashville diesel college. I figure why spend all that extra money when I can go to school near home and choose from two different careers at the school nearby” (Tieken, 2016 p.217).

Another study in rural India found that whilst higher education was positively associated with prospects for white collar employment, which is social valued, young people were concerned that there was no guarantee that this will be the outcome of their financial investment in education. This was found to be particularly of concern to young people who were in lower positions within the existing class hierarchies, as it is possible but remains hard to improve a person’s social positioning (Rao, 2010). Youth living in rural areas in many countries were reluctant to obtain a loan to cover educational expenses:

“I really don't want a loan.” Vince says, “I am not a fan of loans.”

“A loan takes too long to pay back”. KJ says, “If I don't get a loan, that is money in my pocket.”

“I don't like loans, when you get money to pay it back, you are broke.”

“They add extras on to a loan. It is too much to pay back. I would rather not have a loan.” (Stuart, 2008 p. 81)

Interestingly, one study based in Maine examined how tradition deters some people from taking out loans to pay for higher education. Yet, some Mainers risked debt to invest in equipment for traditional occupations, as these were familiar and known risks:

“Mr. R.: “Boy, I don’t know, hard to pin it down. I used to be on the committee for scholarships. You see the cost of these colleges. At MDI, they were picking some of the really high ones, especially Harvard or any of the league colleges. But they are going into debt for \$120,000, a lobster fisherman, they go into debt, as much as that a new boat traps.”

Interviewer: What is the difference there?

Mr. R.: That they know what they are getting into” (Lawrence, 1998).

Higher Education as a Worthy Investment?

The studies also found that within a rural community, opinions about higher education as a worthy investment or not varied. In small communities, while some families did not think higher education was a worthy investment, others did recognise its importance for their children. Further, despite significant challenges, some of these families were successful in helping their children to achieve this goal through encouragement and help in finding scholarship money (Lawrence, 1998; Beasley, 2016; Corra, 2015; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Paiva, 2016; Holt, 2012):

“... for me to go to college and get a good career, period. He’s always telling me to go to college, you know, not to have to work in... a factory or... something like that. He’s always telling me to go to college, you got the chance.” (Corra, 2015 p. 101).

“Mum was really smart. I know she got into uni, but she couldn’t go, because her parents didn’t really have the money to pay for her to live . . . she’s very smart. My mum had put away money since I was young in shares, and when I went into uni, she sold all her shares in order for me to go here. She’s definitely the best mum in the

world. Mum cried when I got into Optometry, and she never cries.” (Holt, 2012 p. 935).

Several studies showed that varying perspectives and concerns about the affordability of going to university in the studies are often associated with the youth’s and their families positioning within lower class structures and lesser financial wealth. This pattern was observed in various countries, such as England, India, America, China, Ethiopia and Canada (Baker & Brown, 2008; Nithya, 2010; Corra, 2015; Holt, 2012; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Most of the studies included in this systematic review were focused on youth from poorer backgrounds. Whilst some youth and their families viewed higher education as a financial risk due to its cost, “cost” also included potential earnings lost if the person went to university for three or four years instead of gaining employment and earning a salary. For example, in economically thriving rural mining towns, youth may be more likely to go straight into employment because of the high starting salaries on offer, without necessarily fully understanding the long-term value and benefits of a university degree:

“Well . . . in Alberta we have the oil fields. It’s really hard to justify going to school for so many years and spending just ridiculous amounts of money when you could make twice as much money and be debt free in the same amount of time” (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016 p. 143).

“like, just deciding, do I want debt for the next how many years or schooling or do I want a new pickup now just cause I can go work now . . . go do a labouring job somewhere now” (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016 p. 144).

Further, youth in other rural contexts were found to assess the value of a degree in the local marketplace against potential earnings return on their educational investment:

“So--it's really overrated, in ways, because there are a lot of people that go to college and spend four years, or however many years they want to spend in college, and then don't even use their degree. And, then I know people that. I don't even think they have a high school diploma, have brought in over \$150,000 a year. I don't know--it's good if you're gonna use your degree., but if you're not, it's a pretty good waste of time-- unless you like the experience, which- I thought high school for me was a pretty good waste of my time except, I like the experience”

“I think more people succeed not going to college, working in factories, than they do goin' to college, wastin' moneyI don't know, I probably won't go too much further if I even go anywhere just depends if I can get along-I just plan on working at (a factory in a neighboring community)]for the rest of my life if I can get on there ... if you've worked there for a while you're gonna get your money built up anyway, you're gonna keep getting' raises. before long, before too long you'll be making a lot of money” (Esveld, 2004 p. 97).

Youth who wished to remain in their rural communities also weighed up the likelihood of being able to use their degree to gain employment in their community against the cost of obtaining one. These young people tended to tailor their career aspirations to the limited professional opportunities available within their local areas:

“I'll be working as a teacher in Clydemouth Primary” (Furlong & Carmel, 1995, p.374)

“I think Westport may have a job chance for me because the vet is always training new workers” (Furlong & Carmel, 1995 p. 373)

Sub-Theme 2: Personal and Social Risk

Risk of Failure

Risk of failure was a consistent theme across the studies included in this systematic review. Students were concerned not only about their ability to succeed in higher education, but also felt pressure from their families and communities to succeed if they did make the big decision to leave their community for higher education. This student described feeling the need to prove themselves, aware that those who leave and then return are often perceived as failures in their community, and so is reluctant to take on that pressure:

“Living here- it feels like I have to face up to where I come from and be responsible. I want to make people here proud- or you have to prove you can do it, there is a lot of sense that the city is a big place, you have to take care there, so you need to prove you can do it. Need to show you can owe up to something.” She pauses, “I think they overdramatize it, preparation for the real world- they over conceptualize it. They say college is so important, but it’s not the right timing for everyone, and not the end of the world if you don’t go, some people find perfectly alternative education or lives they like over college” (Shamah & MacTavish, 200)

The ethics of encouraging youth, especially those from lower-income families in rural areas, to leave and pursue higher education is questioned. This concern arises due to the potentially high financial and social risks involved. Additionally, the fairness of encouraging youth to undertake such commitments when costs are high and successful participation is uncertain was considered in a few studies (Corra, 2015).

The Big City

Youth living in rural areas considering university were found to sometimes be hesitant to leave behind close-knit and connected communities for “the big city,” where they wouldn’t know people. A common theme of feeling unsafe in the city was identified (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Shamah, & MacTavish, 2009; Tieken, 2016). Students frequently referred to the city negatively:

“There isn’t going to be drunk people coming round and knockin’ on your door and coming in; and you don’t have to worry about locking your doors at night because you’re not worried about anyone coming in. You feel safe because you know everyone, and you’re practically related to them and you’re friends with them and stuff. You don’t really have to worry about anyone robbing you either or threatening to kill you” (Corbett, 2007 p. 776).

“Err, there are not as many fights and convicts [with immigrants] as there are in the larger cities. You know, like police and criminals and such. But here, err, there is none of that, so to speak” (Rosvall, 2017 p. 532).

Youth’s experiences outside of their community can exacerbate or mitigate these fears. Youth who were unfamiliar with the city were more anxious about moving to an urban environment than those who had visited the city (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009). This fear was seen to be a factor in the decision to move to the city for higher education or not:

“. . . we don’t have much experience like living in the bigger city. It would be hard, because you trust everyone here, but I mean you can’t really trust everyone there. (Year 10 Student)” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009, p.55).

In contrast, studies in rural Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Malawi found that the city was not perceived as a risk, but as offering opportunity, progress, and a different way of life:

“I dream, always dream that the city isn’t like it is here, here it’s always suffering . . . well, as I see it, there can’t be that much suffering [in the city], because they don’t get wet, they don’t get sunburned, they have their secure jobs, they have their daily schedule, and in contrast, here it’s backbreaking” (Crivello, 2011 p.408).

Making Friends

Student narratives in some of the studies also found that youth in rural communities worried about being able to make new friends, if they left their rural community for higher education. Students described how they progressed through one school with the same set of friends, and so they weren't sure how to engage in new friendships:

“It’s so weird, like I almost don’t know how to make friends because . . . you grow up with .. your class and everybody and everyone knows you and you have friends . . . so coming here and not knowing anybody, and nobody knowing you . . . like I don’t know where to begin, how to make friends, who to make friends with” and “I didn’t know how to make friends, and I didn’t know how to be social, I still don’t.” (Ganss, 2016 p. 275).

Sub-Theme 3: Identity Risk

In several studies, youth living in rural areas expressed concerns that people like them typically don't attend university. They were worried about becoming someone different, changing their social class, and losing their rural identity. Furthermore, they were fearful of changing because this might be seen as betraying their friends and family (Raciti, 2019; Tieken, 2016)). Some youth spoke of their interactions with university-educated people who they felt had changed and become arrogant:

“I’ve realized, when people that have gone to school, they feel as if they are better than everyone else, they’re higher, higher than everybody, and yes, they do have schooling but, uh, they feel as if they are doctors, but they are not, they’ve gone to a few, a few classes, and maybe I resent that a little bit.” (male, 21 years) (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016 p. 145).

One community member described how some families in the area discouraged

college-going because they wanted to prevent children from “rising above their raising” (Beasley, 2016 p. 143). Parents were more fearful of the cultural or emotional distance, than the physical distance, that would be created if their child left to go on to higher education:

“they’d succeed and I wouldn’t be able to talk to them anymore” (Tieken, 2016 p. 217).

“go to college, then they’ll become different people” (Tieken, 2016 p. 217)

“going to appear way smarter than their families and not fit in” (Tieken, 2016 p. 217)

Some youth had a fear of losing their “rural culture” and “rural identity,” and that they would change their values or sense of self by leaving home for university:

“I think it’d be scary . . . let’s say, I have the chance to go to university and make something of myself . . . I think I’d be scared to be somebody different and to know things differently . . . to have my life change from where it is now” (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016 p. 144).

In contrast, this concern was not evident in the studies conducted in countries such as India, Pakistan, Peru, Malawi, and Bangladesh (Crivello, 2011; Del Franco, 2014; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Morrow, 2013; Ames, 2013). In these studies, it was found that leaving for an education in the city was viewed as essential and desired. Rural residents referred to youth in the rural areas as being backward compared to their smarter and advanced city counterparts (Crivello, 2011).

In summary, the literature tends to focus mainly on the financial risk, with personal, social, and identity risk as emerging themes. The analysis also highlights the necessity to understand both perceived and real risks when researching higher education aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas.

Theme 4: Place/Rurality

Figure 5.5

Inter-relationships: Identified Place/Rurality Sub-Themes

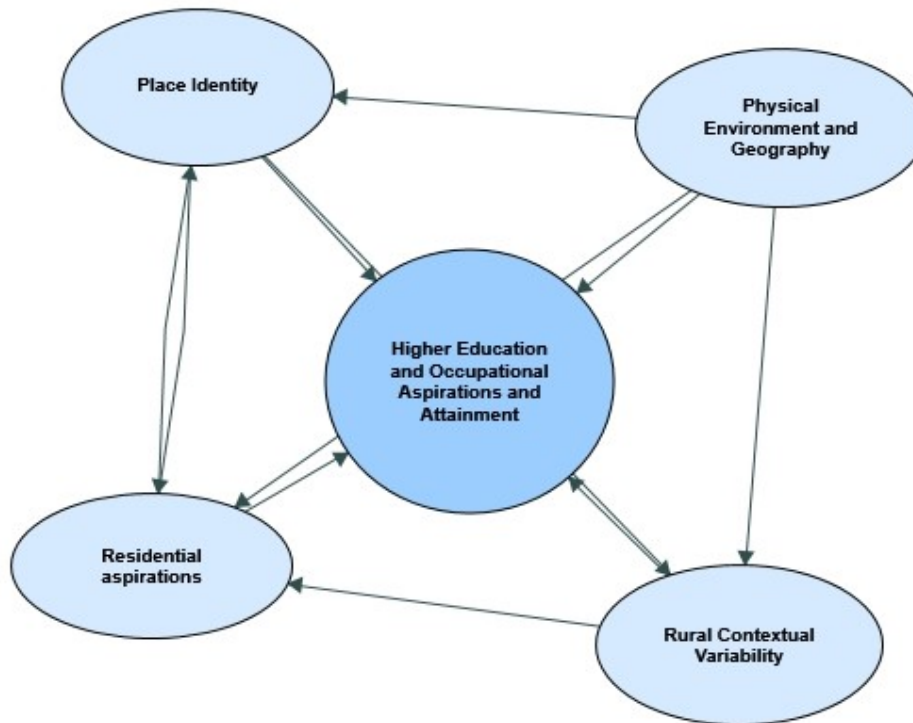


Figure 5.5 illustrates the inter-relationship between the identified place/rurality sub-themes. Throughout the literature in this systematic review, there is a focus on attempting to understand how geography contributes to shaping youth's higher education and occupational aspirations and attainment in particular ways. Attention was drawn to this in some studies through provision of descriptions of rural contexts, including family and community relationships, and descriptions of the rural towns where the studies took place (Corra, 2015; San Antonio, 2016; Whitty et al., 2015; Fataar, 2009; Beasley, 2016; Doyle et al., 2009; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Cairns, 2013; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Esveld, 2004; Lambert, 2010; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993; Baker & Brown, 2008; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Elder et al., 1996; Petrin et al., 2014; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Bachechi 2015; Webb et al., 2015; Shepard & Marshall, 2000; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Howley et al., 1996). The

influence of the physical environment, as well as an attempt to understand if there were distinctive effects of “rurality” (specifically in relation to place) were considered in a limited number of studies (Beasley, 2016; Corbett, 2007; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009).

Sub-Themes:

1. Place Identity: Sense of Place Aspirations, Attachment to Place; Sense of Belonging
2. Residential Aspirations: Migration and Patterns of Mobility
3. Physical Environment and Geography: Climate; Landscape; Isolation; Spatial Effects
4. Rural Contextual Variability: Economies and Industries; Culture; History

Sub-Theme 1: Place Identity

Place is not prominent in most identity theories; however, several studies in the systematic review show that place and identity are intertwined. Place serves as the context within which youths’ educational and occupational aspirations are shaped as they construct possible identities (Corbett, 2007; Bealsey, 2016; San Antonio, 2016; Fataar, 2010; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Cairns, 2014; Doyle et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2015). Some studies highlighted that a rural community or place does not have the same meaning for everyone that lives in that place, and that it is important to resist a single identity of a place purely based on its tradition and history (Lambert, 2010; Esveld, 2004; Corra, 2015).

Attachment to Physical Place and Family

Attachment to the physical place was found to be closely linked to family. In several studies, when youth described why they wanted to stay in their rural communities, their narratives often centred on their families, community, and the natural environment. The attachment to family and place were intertwined:

“I would describe the Valley as everybody pretty much knows everyone, they're linked

in some way. And it's beautiful in the South Valley, 'cause it's like really grassy and green over there" (Bachechi, 2015 p. 136).

"[It's] just hometown I guess. I love it here, so it's where you're born and raised."

"I think that's how it works around here. Everybody is like really family oriented and that helps a lot too. When you go off to school, it's a little bit of a change going from complete family to sort of individuality, but I think it's good because you know that you always feel like you've got somebody behind you or doing this for you or doing that for you" (Beasley, 2016 p. 137).

In several studies, attachment to place was strengthened or weakened by the youth's family relationships (Beasley, 2016; San Antonio, 2016; Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Corra, 2015; Corbett, 2007; Petrin et al., 2014; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Bachechi 2015; Webb et al., 2015). The influence of family ties was stronger for families that had lived in the same area for several generations. As a result, many youths in the studies were living where their parents and grandparents had grown up, surrounded by extended family in the community:

"My grandpa, my dad's dad, lives right beside me, and my uncle, aunt, and their children live right across the road, so as a child my mom worked, my dad worked I went across the street, and they just watched me. It's [the culture] very family oriented, which is nice. Kind of stressful at times. Sometimes you can be loved too much, I think. It's almost annoying (laughing)" (Beasley, 2016 p. 136).

The physical geography of the place was often referenced in the findings, including by youth who deeply identified with their rural natural environment and valued the recreational activities available there:

"I really like living here. . . . Everything's so beautiful and you can be part of it. . . . I can't imagine not living where it's beautiful and you can . . . do things" (Shepard &

Marshall, 2000 p. 166).

“The thing about Sitka I like is that it is on an island. So, you would think that there isn’t that much to do here, but the amount of things you can do outside—whether it is subsistence fishing or hunting—the opportunities are just overwhelming. You could spend a lifetime and not get everything done here” (Lowe, 2015 p. 9).

This deep attachment to place was also related to family, as youth explained how family members had taught them to enjoy their natural environment (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Lowe, 2015; Corra, 2015):

“It just kind of seems like a family activity. Everybody gets on the boat or goes to the dock or whatever you do, and you grab the fishing poles and sit there and cast and you just kind of sit there and listen to old music” (Lowe 2015, p. 9).

Youth also valued the space and quiet they could find in their rural community:

“Well, the scenery is beautiful. . . In the fall you notice it most. You can go outside and it's quiet and you don't hear anything... maybe a bird, but there's nothing else there and it's so peaceful.” (Shepard & Marshall, 2000 p. 160).

Several studies found that “sense of place” encompassed both nature and community: it referred to a physical, natural place where youth found peace and enjoyment, as well as a social environment based on family and community relationships that fostered a sense of belonging (San Antonio, 2016). Some youth found that even though they had left their rural community for several years their sense of place was tied to where they grew up and was hard to find anywhere else (San Antonio, 2016; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Howley et al., 1996; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

A Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging was a common theme across the studies in the systematic review (Corra, 2015; Esveld, 2004:

“It’s a safe place. The people are really nice.” Sarah also observed the niceness of her neighbors: “I love it. I love that it’s a small town and everybody knows everybody, and when something happens everyone is willing to help (Corra, 2015 p. 145).

“...everybody knows everybody here. I’ve lived here my whole life, so I know everybody. We have a small town environment, small-town feel. We know our neighbors, and we can trust people” (Theodori & Theodori, 2014 p. 110)

In contrast, the closeness of community and “everyone knowing everyone” was perceived negatively by some youth. Instead of feeling a sense of community, they experienced feelings of being stifled and judged, which in some instances led them to want to leave their rural communities:

“The saying is., “You sneeze and someone on the other side of the town says, ‘bless you.’”(Esveld, 2004 p. 76).

“But sometimes people look at me and think I’m trouble because they know my family and they think I’ll turn out the same way” (Lambert, 2010 p. 6).

Positive family and community relationships, along with an appreciation of the natural rural environment, were identified as important factors in fostering an attachment to place and constructing a place identity (Bachechi, 2015; Beasley, 2016). This attachment to place and the construction of a place identity were found to either enhance or constrain youth’s aspirations for higher education and occupational opportunities.

Sub-Theme 2: Residential Aspirations: Migration and Patterns of Mobility

Residential Aspirations

Some studies suggested that youth amended or compromised their educational and

occupational aspirations as a result of where, geographically, they would prefer to live, that is, their residential aspirations. An attachment to place, in terms of attachment to both the social relationships, sense of community, and the natural physical environment was found to be a contributing influence on youths' residential aspirations (Cox et al., 2014; Corbett, 2007; Esveld, 2004; Beasley, 2016; Schafft & Biddle, 2015; San Antonio, 2016; Bechechi, 2015; Webb et al., 2015; Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Cairns, 2014).

For youth in rural areas development of their residential aspirations is often tied with the development of higher education and work aspirations. One retrospective study found that as some participants grew older their attachment to place was still influential on their educational, work, and living choices (San Antonio, 2016). One participant, who had left their rural community for several years to pursue higher education and work opportunities in a city, demonstrated their attachment to place. They reflected on wanting to balance their life, explaining that their focus was no longer solely on being able to get the best work or education, but it was also on the environment:

“It is part of growing up rural for children to have an understanding of their environment” (San Antonio, 2016 p. 256).

The participant described their attachment to place as a sense of “ownership of the place,” and also highlighted that in a rural area there were opportunities to be “a big fish in a small pond and really make a difference” (San Antonio, 2016 p. 256). Another participant did feel at home in their current urban location, however, stated that they remained deeply attached to rural life and returned when they could to help their dad. They also stated that they missed the sense of community they grew up with, and tried to find ways to bring it to where they were currently living:

“I feel very comforted by living in the small community. . . . It gave me, I don't know, tools to be a community player, but also . . . I know the value of hard work and the value of knowing your neighbors (San Antonio, 2016 p. 256).

Migration

Migration away from rural areas by youth post-school was considered in several studies (Howley et al., 1996; Tieken, 2016; Smithmier, 1994; Petrin et al., 2014; Seyfrit et al., 1998; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Azaola, 2012; Van Hook, 1990). Out migration was found to be a concern in some of the earlier studies (Howley et al., 1996; Van Hook, 1990; Smithmier, 1994; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1993), and continued to be of concern in some of the more recent studies (Tieken, 2016; Fleming & Grace, 2017; Cairns, 2014). One concern was that outmigration of youth, who were pursuing higher education or career opportunities in urban areas, would lead to a decline in the growth and quality of life in the rural communities they left behind (Howley et al., 1996; Van Hook, 1990; Tieken, 2016):

“know if we send our kids to college they’re never coming back here because there are no jobs,” (Tieken, 2016 p. 217).

“Having raised this great kid to go off and do something somewhere else, it doesn’t benefit your community” (Tieken, 2016 p. 218).

Migration was perceived to be an important next step for youth from rural areas to further their education and embark on a career, a finding consistent across several studies in this systematic review. This was found to be similar in various countries, including Australia, America, Canada, Norway, China, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. For example, studies from Peru, Mexico, India, and Bangladesh found that out migration from rural communities was often viewed as a necessity for finding work and earning money for the family, due to the limited job opportunities and poverty in these areas (Crivello, 2011; Giuliani et al., 2017; Morrow, 2013; Rao & Hossain, 2012).

Migration, education, and work were seen as the most effective means of escaping poverty and marginalisation, contributing to the development of a “culture of migration” (Crivello, 2011). In one study in Southern Mexico, migration was found to be the biggest

source of social, cultural, and economic capital in the community. This finding contrasts with those from Australia, Canada, and America (Valentine et al., 2017).

Differential Residential Aspirations and Migration

Several studies explored the varying residential aspirations and patterns of migration and mobility in rural communities. The studies highlighted that the decision faced by youth in rural areas—whether to leave for higher education in urban areas or stay in their rural communities and not pursue higher education—is complex. Factors influencing this decision include attachment to place, sense of community and belonging, rural restructuring, financial constraints, local labour markets, and messages received from teachers, peers, family, and community members. These factors play significant roles in shaping youths' higher education and residential aspirations (Petrin et al., 2014; Tieken, 2016; Cairns, 2014; Van Hook, 1990).

The literature also revealed a tension between family and community members in economically declining rural areas. They sometimes wanted to support youth to leave and pursue higher education to reach their full potential; however, they were torn because they understood the negative effects this could have on the community, and hoped there was some way for the youth to return:

“I think it's a two-edged sword. We want our youth to stay, but at the same time, we want them to have the opportunities that they are not going to have if they necessarily stay here. It's tricky. I mean, uh, we encourage some of our kids—I'm hoping some of our kids will go out and become teachers and maybe come back and help teach at this school as some of us get older and retire. You know, I would love to think that we could revitalize some of the town and hopefully have some shops and jobs that may not be available today to some of our kids. But in reality, I think a lot of our kids look at it as a chance, you know, to go on to (larger places)—find opportunities and the ones that are the most successful may not come back. I think that's the tricky part. We want them to go out and find those opportunities, but we also ... I think we need some

of the more successful ones to come back and you know really push the town to grow and succeed” (Petrin et al., 2014 p. 316).

“the feeling of the community is that we want them to have every opportunity to succeed and we know if they stay here, the income opportunities are so limited they may end up on welfare” (Petrin et al., 2014 p. 316).

“A female student from a rural Appalachian community similarly noted that adults in her community “just know that there's nothing really around here for younger (people) . . . there is no opportunity for us so, I mean, for us to get away and make something of ourselves is more what they see in us” (Petrin et al., 2014 p. 317).

Several nuances were found as to why youth chose to stay in their local areas despite understanding that this may limit their education and career choices. Some youth were unable to imagine living in a city, and their preference was to remain in their familiar community as this was their vision for having a good life:

“Jennifer: I'd like to live in a small community like this, because it just suits me--- but I'd also kind a like to be a little outset from the community, not like right in the town, living-wise-just ‘cuz it's better not in town”

“James: Country-- right here. I can't think of any place better for kids to grow up than a small town (Esveld, 2004 p. 94).

Further, youth whose residential preference was to remain, despite having the means to leave, often valued the country life and its relationship to the land. They tended to prioritise family relationships and continuing to have the life they enjoy and couldn't imagine living elsewhere away from their families (Martin & Duke, 1996; Esveld, 2004; Ellison et al., 2014; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Doyle et al., 2009; Corbett, 2007; Funnell, 2008; Sheppard &

Marshall, 2000). In other words, youth in this category were motivated to reside in their rural community to stay close to their families and enjoy the rural way of life. Often this decision was made regardless of what the education and work options were in the community:

“I wanna live in the area because my family's here. If I didn't, like, have my sister and my niece and nephew, then that would just be horrible. So, I have to live here”

(Esveld, 2004 p. 97).

“I don't really want to move away from here. I want to find a suitable job here so, provided I can get a job here I'll stay here or go back to school next year ... or do a work placement or something to lead into an apprenticeship” (Funnell, 2008 p. 22).

Some studies found that youth whose residential aspiration was to ultimately return and remain in their rural communities often tailored their higher education choices to jobs available locally, such as healthcare (nursing), and education (Beasley, 2016; Ellis et al., 2010; Corbett, 2007; Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Cox et al., 2014; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995).

Conflicting Residential Aspirations

Physical place attachment was found to be inextricably tied with social attachment to family and friends. Youth found it difficult to balance the emotional ties to place and family with the need to move away for higher education (Elder et al., 1996; Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009). Emotional stress was found to be high in youth who expressed the desire to live near their family, yet believed they would leave their rural community for higher education and work purposes (Elder et al., 1996). Several studies found many youths had conflicting aspirations between leaving and staying (Beasley, 2016; Doyle et al., 2009; Corbett, 2007; Whitty et al., 2015; Giuliani et al. 2017). This conflict arose from several factors: attachment to place and community, mixed messages from community members who either encouraged

leaving to achieve success or staying to maintain connections, perceptions of limited economic and work opportunities locally:

“I’m kind of torn between it because I really love West Virginia and I don’t think I would live anywhere else and I’m not saying Mingo County. I love the state, but I would like to go back to Williamson because it would be amazing to change something about Williamson, but I also think that some things are just beyond saving. We’re not encouraged to come back ...[by]anyone. We’re encouraged to go away ... I think they see the climate it is and the kind of mindset the people, the older citizens have and they, I think, they’re afraid that young people will go to college and come back and be all fresh and full of learning and knowledge and then get sucked in and just forget, so they encourage us, they say, “Move away. Don’t come back. Come to visit, but don’t come back” (Beasley, 2016 p. 157).

Several studies presented leaving as socio-spatial mobility in relation to neoliberal discourses of moving outward and upward toward success, which seemed to lack acknowledgement of the importance of place for youth in rural communities (Carins, 2013, 2014; Corbett, 2007):

“Mom says that no matter what, her kids have to go to college so they can get a good career. And so that way we have something to look forward to everyday” (Cairns, 2013 p. 340)

As one study participant explained, they knew they would have to do well in higher education or they would not be successful, however, the participant then went on to express their attachment to their rural community:

“couldn’t imagine living anywhere else but Fieldsville (Cairns, 2013. P. 341).

This was found to not only make the decision to move away difficult, but was also found, in some cases, to continue to be difficult as students dropped out of higher education and returned to their home:

“: . . . they just found it too hard without their family . . . a lot of people have like extended families here and they are so used to that support unit, and they get thrown out into the open ...” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p.56).

It was evident in the literature that many youth considered both, living close to family and community and leaving to be successful important. Yet the discourse across the literature highlighted a dual discourse of either staying (valuing their rural community) or leaving (individual success) (Beasley, 2016; Holt, 2012; Tieken, 2016; Petrin et al., 2014; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Bachechi, 2015; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995, Corbett, 2007). Some studies suggested that it would be beneficial to reframe this “either-or” discourse (Beasley, 2016; Corbett, 2007). A variety of studies provided examples of youth who preferred not to leave their rural communities but did so due to the limited opportunities (Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Bechechi, 2015; Tieken, 2016; Corbett, 2007; Beasley, 2016; Petrin et al., 2014; San Antonio, 2016).

Youth demonstrated their attachment to place through their desire to return to their rural communities to start a family and raise their young children:

“they might work overseas or have a really interesting ten years beyond a qualification, but then once they've partnered, quite a few want to raise their family in this fantastic rural environment, which has got every natural attraction you can think of” (Webb et al., 2015 p. 48).

“I do enjoy living where I do. It's a very nice place to live ... who would not want to live in a place like this? I think for a young person you have to have the hustle and bustle of a city and I don't think Carlisle's quite that. I think I would move back here if

I had the chance in later life I would move back here” (Whitty et al., 2015 p.18).

However, youth also acknowledged that their rural community may not be ideal for teenagers:

“I think it was a good place to grow up because I basically lived in the outdoors, but, I mean, the wintertimes, you know, for the kids now there’s temptation for alcohol and drug abuse here because there’s nothing to do in the wintertime” (Lowe, 2015 p. 48).

Youth whose residential aspiration was to leave and live in larger urban centres often spoke of their rural communities as having limited opportunities—in terms of leisure, education, and work—and expressed a dislike for close-knit communities (Esveld, 2004; Beasley, 2016; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Doyle et al., 2009; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Holt, 2012; Whitty et al., 2015; Giuliani et al., 2017). For these youth there appeared to be no strong place attachment or social ties to the community, and they were excited to explore the wider world and see what opportunities there were, including meeting new people:

“I don't know [where, exactly, I want to be]-just away from here., that's all I know just want to be out of Iowa. I'm so bored here; it's so boring-- so as long as I'm out an' away” (Esveld, 2004 p. 95).

“I wanna see everything I can, experience everything I can. And I've done pretty much, most everything in Bonteville you Can do. [I would be] just nice to be anonymous-but, here you can't, Everybody knows who you are, It's kind of restricting” (Esveld, 2004 p. 96).

“I want to see new things, I want to see the world, see new people, new environments...Miami, Las Vegas, Los Angeles...living here is just seeing the same thing over and over again” Theodori & Theodori, 2014 p. 96).

For some youth, the choice to stay or leave was not readily available due to financial constraints and other life circumstances (Corbett, 2013; Beasley, 2016). This often represented a cumulative disadvantage, as they were already limited economically or in other ways, and a lack of access to higher education further constrained their opportunities to improve their life situation. Additionally, youth who experienced family conflict and emotional distress were found to have a weakened attachment to their community. In some cases, this also impacted their development into socially confident, independent individuals capable of successfully navigating a move away from home (Elder et al., 1996).

In contemporary times, increased travel and global communications have fostered a societal norm suggesting that geographic and social mobility are routine (Webb et al., 2015). However, the literature presented a more complex picture, revealing that youth in rural communities often have emotional connections with their physical surroundings, a phenomenon described as “embodied psychologies of place” (Webb et al., 2015). In summary, the literature found that youths’ decisions on their future residential, educational, and occupational aspirations were impacted by a complex mix of factors: attachment to place, limited local opportunities, financial constraints, and perceptions of what opportunities might be available and suitable for them (Webb et al., 2015).

Sub-Theme 3: Physical Environment and Geography

Spatial Effects: Travel and Isolation

Spatial effects of isolation were identified as problematic in several studies, particularly in terms of youth needing to travel to different towns to access services such as leisure and entertainment facilities, education, and work opportunities. Travel was found to often be an issue due to limited public transport options, especially for those too young to drive or without access to a car or money for public transport (Corra, 2015; Theodori & Theodori, 2014; Whitty et al., 2015; Shepard & Marshall, 2000):

"I'm stuck in the house now . . . having to wait until my parents want to go somewhere before I can go. I think that's what I don't like the most — is living out here and not being able to go places and . . . I wasn't able to get a job . . ." (Shepard & Marshall, 2000 p.161).

Isolation was also examined in terms of the distance to higher education institutions, as previously discussed in theme 2: social and structural systems. However, the social and emotional spatial effects on youth was explored to a lesser extent.

Physical Landscape and Climate Change

A focus on the physical environment of the rural communities appeared to be limited. Several studies provided contextual background of the rural communities with a basic overview of the natural environment, however, only a small number of studies provided a detailed description about the physical landscape that the youth were growing up in. There appeared to be a gap in the literature between youths' emotional and physical interaction with the physical landscape and the influence of this on their higher education aspirations. A closeness with the landscape was expressed in some participants narratives:

"Living here, it's taught me to appreciate nature and the environment . . . I've also learned to appreciate myself kind of because I can see better, I can just see . . . kind of . . . like the beauty in myself. . . like I am a part of this." (Shepard & Marshall, 2000 p. 166).

Further, climate did not appear to be a focus in the studies in the systematic review. Only a very limited number of studies explicitly referred to climate, in particular, drought, in relation to the influence on youth's higher education aspirations:

"There's no water here. This town is going to get shut down because we've got no water We're just going to run out..."

We need water. You can't have a town with no water" (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p. 57)

Climate change was explicitly mentioned in only one study in relation to local labour markets and job opportunities for youth in rural communities. It reported that one-third of the youths interviewed spoke about local environmental challenges (Giuliani et al., 2017).

Sub-Theme 4: Rural Contextual Variability

Most of the studies included in the review were highly contextualised, involving case studies in specific rural locations. While most took place in rural communities experiencing economic decline, only a few were conducted in economically thriving areas. Despite this, there was a variety of histories and cultures represented in the studies.

Diverse Rural Communities

A small number of studies explored the diversity between different rural communities (Alloway et al., 2004; Young et al., 1997). One such study by Alloway et al. (2004) examined two regional communities that differed significantly. One community was economically thriving due to a booming mining industry and presented multiple examples of opportunity and affluence. In contrast, the other community was economically declining due to its steel mining industry being rationalised and downsized, leading to experiences of poverty and few opportunities for its community members. The study highlighted the different lived experiences of youth in these two contrasting contexts.

In the economically declining mining town, a high number of youth lived alone due to the low housing and rent costs, even though they came from low-income families. However, in the thriving mining town, real estate was very expensive because of the high salaries in mining jobs, so youth needed to remain living at home with their families (Alloway et al., 2004). In the thriving mining town, many of the youths' families had high salaries and expensive cars and boats for leisure. The material differences, due to the differences in the

local economies, available to the youth from these towns was very real.

The study found that youths' higher education and occupational aspiration development seemed to be intertwined in the local economy and labour market opportunities in which the youth and their communities were embedded (Alloway et al., 2004). This study found that many youths in the economically declining mining town aspired to leave their town for higher education and work opportunities, as they determined that there was nothing for them, in terms of careers and work locally.

Further, other studies conducted in economically thriving mining towns reported some negative effects on youth living in these areas, including a more transient population characterised by a fly-in fly-out culture. This culture led to a high turnover of workers who had little connection with the community (Schafft & Biddle, 2015; Alloway et al., 2004; Young et al., 1997). As a result, youth felt that their rural town was losing its sense of community, with the composition shifting from families to high numbers of single men (Schafft & Biddle, 2015; Alloway et al., 2004):

"Those of us who live here, we think it's negative, and we want them out, but those who are coming in and need the jobs, they think it's absolutely amazing, but I can't stand it" (Schafft & Biddle, 2015 p. 78).

One study found that youth who left their home communities to access the high paying employment opportunities in mining areas paid a high personal cost to family and friend relationships and led a potentially lonely life living in socially disconnected communities (Alloway et al., 2004). The cost of housing was also related to the incoming of workers with high salaries, which proved to be an issue for local residents:

"A lot of the houses with the old folks in 'em, they go to the gas guys because they can get the most money from it. Lately, a lot of people have been trying to keep the houses for families because, I mean, they're just, it's not-'cuz when I was younger there was,

you knew, I knew everybody who was my neighbor. Now, I don't know half the people who live on my street” (Schafft & Biddle, 2015 p. 78).

Another perceived negative reported by local youth living in rural areas was that the community was changing in terms of traffic, population, and noise:

“On our neighbor's hill, we went up and you look out and you could see six drilling things, just looking around and it's crazy. It's like a city at night. All of it lights up” (Schafft & Biddle, 2015 p. 78).

Some studies conducted in farming communities reported a strong attachment to place despite often-declining economies (Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Martin & Duke, 1996; Young et al., 1997; Funnell, 2008; Giuliani et al., 2017; Esveld, 2004). These studies also found that youth from farming families felt a powerful connection to the land through farming. However, this was combined with an acknowledgement that they would need to find employment off the farm as the farm was economically in decline (Esveld, 2004). This strong attachment to place and family was described in some studies as “cultural remnants of earlier generations when geographic isolation and subsistence farming made reliance on family a necessity” (Beasley, 2016 p. 242). Comparison of different regional communities, in terms of economy, history, culture, physical landscape, and climate, is an area identified in this systematic review that did not receive much attention.

In summary, the literature primarily focused on place identity and residential aspirations to understand the impact of place and rurality on youths’ higher education and occupational aspirations and attainment. There was limited attention to the physical environment and rural contextual variability to assist with understanding the unique effects of rurality on aspirations.

Theme 5: Globalisation and Neoliberalism

Figure 5.6

Inter-relationships: Identified Globalisation and Neoliberalism Sub-Themes

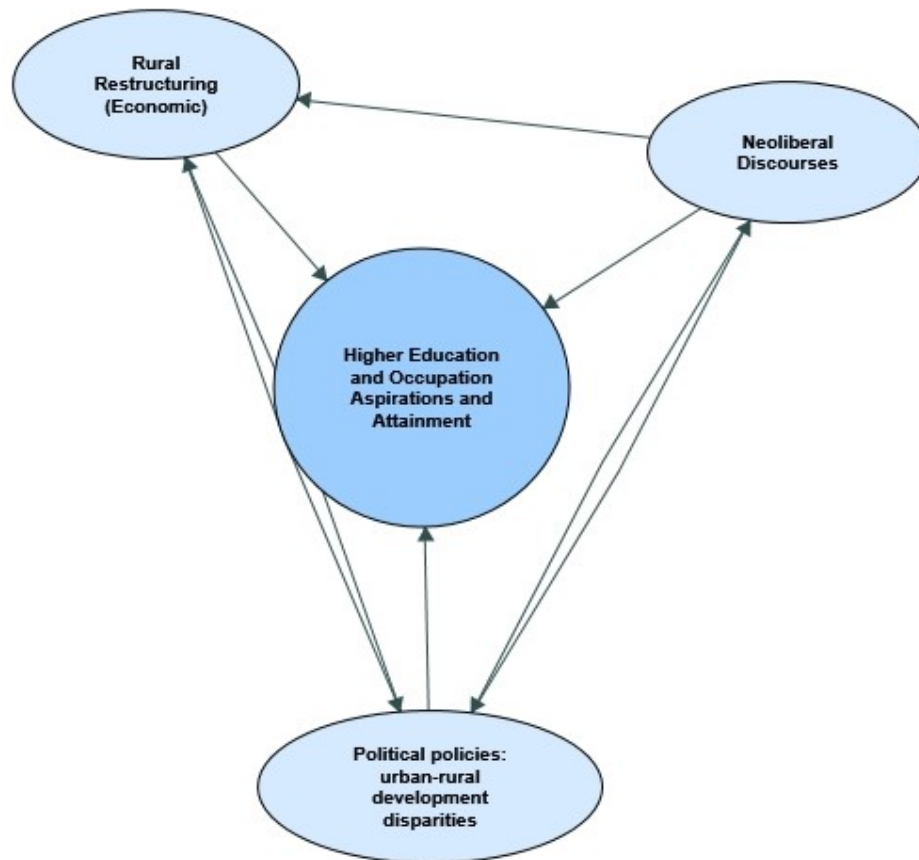


Figure 5.6 illustrates the inter-relationships between the globalisation and neoliberalism sub-themes. The impact of globalisation and neoliberalism on the aspirations and attainment of higher education and occupation for youth from rural communities was identified as an emerging theme in nineteen included in the systematic review studies (Elder et al., 1996; Ticken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Lowe, 2015; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Webb et al., 2015; Cairns, 2014; Azaola, 2012; Crivello, 2011; McSwan, & Stevens, 1995; Fataar, 2010; Philipsen, 1993; Corra, 2015; Martinez & Cervera, 2012; Bachechi, 2015; Holt, 2012; Kenway, & Hickey-Moody, 2011; Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010).

Sub-Themes

1. Economic: Rural Restructuring
2. Neoliberal Discourses
3. Policy Influence: Urban-Rural Development Disparities

Sub-Theme 1: Economic Rural Restructuring

The theme of globalisation and neoliberalism, in relation to rural restructuring and increasing diversity of rural economies, was evident in several studies as an underlying influence on shaping higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment of youth in rural communities (Elder et al., 1996; Tieken, 2016; Lowe, 2015; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Azaola, 2012; Fataar, 2010; Howley et al. 1996).

Local Employment Structures and Higher Education

Globalisation has increased global interconnectedness of social and economic life through rapid changes in information and transportation technologies. Further, neoliberal policies have favoured deregulation of financial markets and consolidation of corporate power. As a result, in an increasingly globalized economy, rural areas have undergone agricultural and economic restructuring which has impacted on the local labour markets and employment opportunities. One study conducted in a rural Alaskan community noted that:

“Alaska coastal communities are currently experiencing a high degree of economic uncertainty associated with the globalization and restructuring of fisheries, changing environmental conditions, and rapid internal and externally influenced sociocultural changes” (Lowe, 2015 p. 21).

In another study conducted in Australia, a participant describes the changes in their rural area:

“Since the 1970s, grazing has become more capital based, turning to a use of modern technology – road transport replacing droving, and helicopters (gyrocopters) for mustering... Owners tend to look for more out of the land, such as planting crops, as they experiment with alternatives to grazing that involve labour-saving machinery and a reduction in labour costs” (Funnell, 2008 p. 18).

Some studies in the systematic review found that youth in rural communities were aware of, and named, the changing rural economy as a motivator for their career-orientated drive towards higher education (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Tieken, 2016; Lowe, 2015). Previous generations had been able to make a good living in the traditional occupations that did not require higher education. However, participants explained that due to changes in rural industries there was now limited employment available:

“The unskilled labour market that offers a living wage and benefits has all but disappeared” (Tieken, 2016 p. 212).

Youth often commented on the small scale of rural economies, the lack of economic opportunities, and limited range of careers in the area with the exception of mining, teaching, and healthcare (Beasley, 2016; Corra, 2015; Shepard & Marshal, 2000):

“ . . . Once you finish your education there’s not much here for you” (Year 10 Student)” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p. 56).

The idea that higher education was necessary for life outside of the community, even though it had not previously been important for those who stayed in the local area, due to the changing economic base was found to impact higher education and occupation aspirations:

“People ask me like if I'm going to stay home and go fishing and stuff but from the way that's looking I ain't gonna be able to do that. So I'm going to have to get out of

here and go to some kinda' college or something. Really what I wanted to do, I wasn't sure about it cause I kinda' like building stuff and designing things like that. Mom was saying that engineering or architecture might be good. (NT- Male-aged 16)" (Corbett, 2007 p. 776).

Service and Energy Based Rural Economies

Another change found was the shift in some rural areas to service-based economic activity, which has led to youth facing a different job market from the one their parents knew (Howley, 1996). Some studies examined how processes of globalisation and neoliberalism affected the economics of energy, and therefore the people and towns that have these energy sources. Studies considered how resource dependency in some rural communities, including fracking and coal mining, effects youth's higher educational and occupational aspirations (Beasley, 2016).

One of the findings was that many students aspired to careers which were attainable to them in their local area and were motivated by the high entry level starting wages in the mining industry (Beasley, 2016). However, it was found that there was a gender disparity and so more female youth aspired to higher education as they were unable to access the highly paid work in the mining industry straight from school (Beasley, 2016)

Sub-Theme 2: Neoliberal Discourses

Choice, Merit and Individualism

Neoliberal educational discourses of individualism, choice, and merit view participation in and attainment of higher education as the result of a person's individual merit (ability, potential, and hard work). However, this discourse fails to examine how structural inequalities such as economic, cultural, and geographic factors, can result in exclusion from higher education, as well as a misrecognition of ability (Ball, 2014). Neoliberal discourses around merit, individualism, and choice were evident, implicitly, in many studies in the

systematic review. The influence of neoliberal educational discourses on shaping aspirations, alongside the categorisation of rural as deficit (highlighted in Theme 1: Capital), was apparent in the narratives of youths and their families in many of the reviewed studies, and could be seen to shape aspirations (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; Bachechi, 2015). Particularly identifiable, were neoliberal discourses which positioned students with lower grades as being less able and “not smart” contributing to reinforcing the notion that they were not people who went on to higher education. These discourses failed to acknowledge the structural inequalities, such as less school resources and specialised teachers, that can result in lower educational outcomes across a student’s schooling, instead placing the issue with the individual.

However, only a limited number of studies critically explored these discourses and how they shaped youth’s higher education and occupation aspiration and attainment (Holt, 2012; Cairns, 2013, 2014; Crivello, 2011). Notably, one such study highlights two students questioning of the discourse around “choice” and “being smart”:

“C: The question is, though, did we go to uni because we were smart, or were we smart because we wanted to go to uni?”

B: Well, there is a discourse, you know, a bit like the word on the street ‘everyone has a choice. This is a free country, and you can choose.’ Sometimes, I wonder how true that actually is. What has tied all of you together, as different as you all are, is that your parents wanted you to go to uni, or at least presented it as a viable option”
(Holt, 2012 p. 932).

In another study, Cairns (2014) explores how younger students negotiate the neoliberal imperative to project themselves into an imagined future, focusing on how they “navigate the discourses available to them within legitimate categories of being” (p. 342). Cairns (2014) was concerned with the individualising framework of neoliberal discourse, and

how any gap between dream and reality is explained as the result of personal shortcomings and failure, without acknowledgement of structural inequalities (Cairns, 2013). Cairns asked the question: the fact that Fieldsville girls can envision successful futures is surely a positive thing; but what costs might such visions of success incur? (p. 343).

Another aspect of the current neoliberal discourse around success is that it encourages youth to leave their communities in favour of a more individualistic and material-orientated future, which often is in contrast with rural community values (San Antonio, 2016). Crivello (2011) explicitly refers to the widespread globalising discourse around the value of school education for defining childhoods and successful youth transitions in Peru, as being reflected in an increase in higher education aspirations from the participants in the study (p.407). However, Crivello (2011) goes on to state that the universal value of education is not being matched by universal opportunities, with a disproportionate number of children from rural communities not finishing secondary school. Crivello (2011) questions the role of the education discourse defining “failure” or “successes of children and young adults, globally, as well as within countries and regions where structural inequalities shape life chances and transitions to adulthood” (p. 408).

Neoliberal discourses of that prioritise economic benefits over local costs were found to cause tensions in rural communities where new energy resource industries were emerging. In some of these rural communities, the economic benefits of industrial development are strongly emphasised, and in some cases, this is at the cost of local social and environmental factors (Schafft & Biddle, 2015). Although there is recognition of the importance of job creation and economic opportunities among teachers, families, and youth, there were also concerns over the environmental degradation. This includes the destruction of local resources such as water tables, which threatens valued aspects of rural living hunting, fishing, and spending time outdoors. Additionally, changes to the local area through increased population, traffic, and noise raised further concerns.

For the local community this was seen as threatening the rural identity of their community. The larger neoliberal narrative of economic benefits outweighing local costs was problematic especially when there were doubts that the new economic opportunities would truly benefit local residents and be sustainable. The well-being of rural communities appeared to be peripheral in consideration, with the focus on what resources the rural community can offer in the global market (Corbett, 2007; Schafft, 2010; Schafft & Biddle, 2015).

Identity Development

Some of the literature drew attention to how neoliberal discourses and processes of individualisation, meritocracy, and migration are contributing to additional challenges of stable identity development for youth in rural communities. The neoliberal discourse about global values to become producers and consumers in free market economies often conflicts with youth living in rural areas' value systems. Youth in rural communities, especially those living in poverty, can experience tensions between aspirations shaped by neo-liberal policies and discourses of merit, educational achievement and economic success, and actual lived experiences. Often, they are unable to access higher education or a better-paying jobs due to financial and geographical constraints. This phenomenon was found in studies from several rural communities across different countries (Morrow, 2013; Corbett, 2007).

Sub-Theme 3: Policy Influence

Education and economic policies are fundamental in shaping individual and community economic well-being. The goal being to enable the greatest number of choices for people. However, several studies in the systematic review highlighted the challenges facing students, schools, and communities in rural areas due to education and economic policy impacts (Alloway et al., 2004; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Corbett, 2007; Bachechi, 2015).

Urban and Rural Economic Disparities

The uneven economic development between rural and urban areas in general was a common theme:

“Along with teachers, students also spoke about the material realities of living outside of the metropolis that impacted on their lives. As one student explained, rural residents experienced in the daily lives the material reality of being ‘restricted,’ an experience that was counterpoised with city dwellers having ‘options’:

S: I don’t want to have to live in the country because I’ve been through my life being restricted in everything. Like I don’t want to have to raise my family being restricted. I want them to have all the options. And in the city you’ve got options. In the country you don’t” (New South Wales Independent Year 10 Student) (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009 p.56).

Notably, although many of the studies reported on rural restructuring, declining rural labour markets, and the unequal provision of education and higher education in rural areas as a policy context for higher education aspiration development, there appeared to be limited detailed focus on policies themselves. I found only two studies. One study conducted in Peru considered public policy effects in relation to undocumented students’ access to education, including higher education (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014). And another study in Mexico was concerned with the policies around for-profit higher education institutions and their very poor retention and completion rates (Bachechi, 2015).

In summary, the emerging theme of globalisation and neoliberalism in relation to policies and discourses appears to be important to further understand and interrogate structures and discourses that either enable or constrain higher education aspirations and attainment for youth in rural areas.

Theme 6: Identity Development and Place - Construction of Future Identities

Figure 5.7

Inter-relationships: Identified Identity Development and Place Sub-Themes

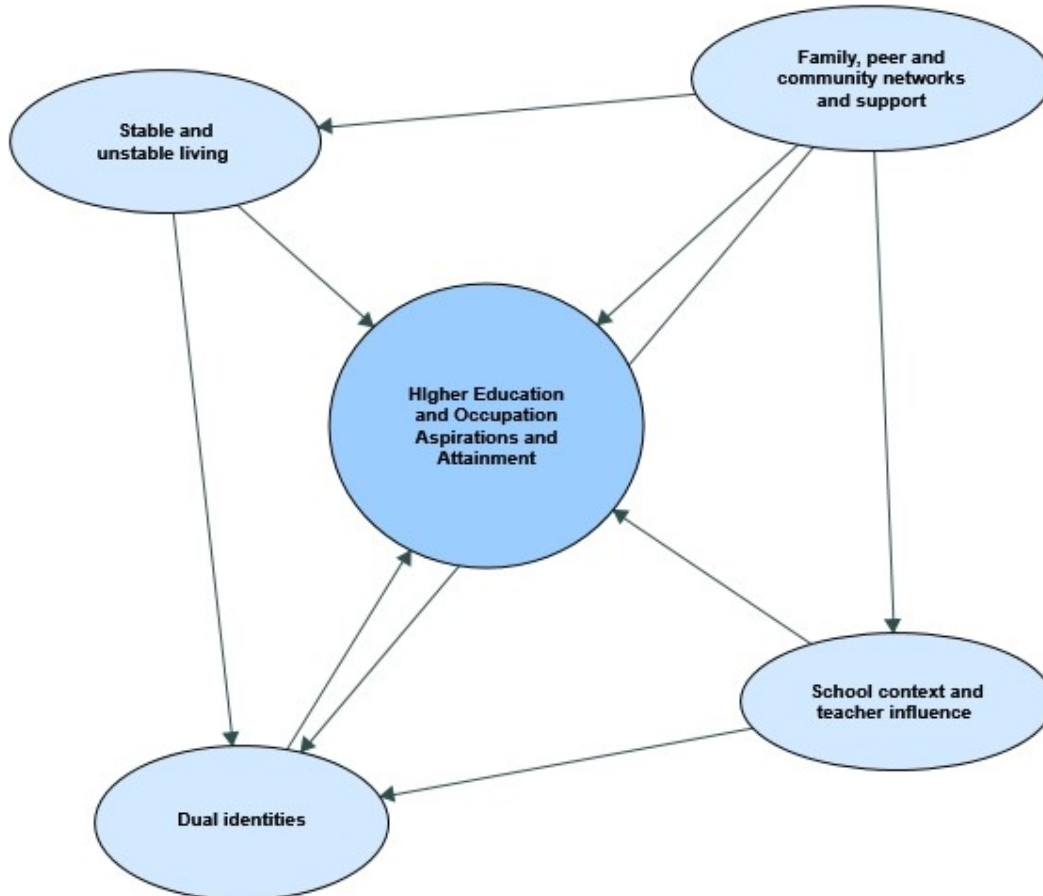


Figure 5.7 illustrates the inter-relationships between the identity development and place identified sub-themes. Identity development was discussed in several studies in terms of how individual, family, school, and community contexts can shape a persons' identity in adolescence. Identity development is understood to be an important part of adolescence. The studies in this systematic review were concerned with how youth developed their educational and occupational aspirations, whilst shaping an image of who they are and who they want to be in the future (Shepard, 2004; San Antonio, 2016; Lawrence, 1998; Burnell, 1999; Britton, 2011; Lambert, 2010; Sheek, 2007; Esveld, 2004; Hendrickson, 2012; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Hawkins, 2017; Theron et al., 2014; Lopez, 2004; Bachechi, 2015; Corra, 2015;

Schafft & Biddle, 2015; Guenther et al., 2015; Means et al., 2016; Nelson, 2016). Several studies drew on Erikson's Identity development model (1968) which identified adolescence as a time of identity formation, engaging in the exploration of different identities (Corbett, 2007; Erikson, 1968). Most studies used a human developmental lens to examine youths' construction of identity.

One approach reflected in the literature was to explore identity development in terms of a youths' construction of a "college-going identity," that is, an identity of someone who expects to go on to higher education after school (Blythe, 2004; Whitty et al., 2015; Burnell, 2003). As youth develop their higher education and occupation aspirations, and construct an identity, youth living in rural communities have additional tensions and conflicts in regard to their post-school future. As has been identified in the literature in the previous sections, for youth living in rural communities to go on to higher education usually requires them to leave their home and community, which causes additional socio-emotional and financial concerns.

Therefore, the development of a "college-going" identity for youth in rural areas is complex. As they decide on the most appropriate path for themselves, they must consider various options including higher education, vocational skills training, and work opportunities. The literature describes identity development as a period during which youth are trying to make sense of their own past while constructing their future on a daily basis, as they become more independent and self-sufficient. This includes thinking about wider ethical concepts such as ecological concerns and how they would contribute to the world (San Antonio, 2016; Whitty et al, 2015). During this period youth have hopes of shaping their lives and growing into who they want to be.

Sub-Themes:

1. Family, Peer and Community Networks and Support
2. Stable and Unstable living
3. Dual Identities
4. School Context and Teacher Influence

Sub-Theme 1: Family, Peer, and Community Networks and Support

Several studies identified youth's relationships with family, school, and peers as playing an important part in shaping their identity in relation to higher education aspirations and expectations (Temudo & Abrantes, 2015; Burnell, 1999; Ellison et al., 2014; Corra, 2015; Elder et al. 1996; Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2016; Paiva, 2016; Seyfrit, 1998; Britton, 2011; San Antonio, 2016). The studies found that positive relationships were important as a foundation for youth in rural communities to construct a well-developed personal, social, and school and learning-related identity development (Senior & Chenhall, 2012; San Antonio, 2016).

This support was found to be crucial for contributing to an identity-making narrative of a person who is capable of going on to higher education (Holt, 2012; San Antonio, 2016; Beasley, 2016). Supportive parents, siblings, friends, and other community members, regardless of whether they themselves had experienced higher education, were found to be vital in enabling youth from rural communities to choose and envision higher education as part of their future. Additionally, this support was key to helping them move from their rural home to an urban area for higher education (Holt, 2012).

Several studies explored youths hopes and expectations for their future lives, particularly in terms of education and careers. Two distinctly rural findings, shaping their identity development, were youths focus on where they were going to live, and related to this a deep sense of loss of friendships and social networks as people either chose to stay or leave their rural community (San Antonio, 2016).

Sub-Theme 2: Stable and Unstable Living

A few studies identified that stable and supportive family environments help cultivate interests and activities which enhance youths' recognition of opportunities and develop resilience to challenges. This support was shown to also broaden the range of possibilities for their future selves and lives (Webb et al., 2015). In contrast, unstable family relationships and living conditions were found to hinder identity development (Burnell, 1999; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Stuart, 2008; Theron et al., 2014; Jeffries, 1993; Hampton-Garland, 2009; Webb et al., 2015; Fataar, 2010; Bachechi, 2015; San Antonio, 2016). Moving home and schools frequently, intergenerational unemployment and poverty, and complex families were found to increase the likelihood of leaving school early, as well as limiting opportunities for youth to imagine possible future lives and selves:

“They [my parents] were mad and told me that I needed to go back, that they would like for me to go back, but it didn't make a difference. No, I just, well, I was in the 10th grade. No, I was in the 11th grade. Well, for one thing I went to [a high school in a nearby town] for the 9th and half of the 10th grade. I was living with my mother. Then I moved back to [the Centerville area] with my grandmother, to attend [another high school] during exam time, and I got real messed up. I got behind, and I just couldn't get back on track. When I quit I had planned to go to summer school that year. I just didn't get in on summer school, and then I just didn't go back. I was crazy. I could have made it. I only needed two classes during summer school to make it to the next grade” (Jeffries, 1993 p.430).

However, it was also found that youth who have overcome many challenges often had improved resilience, as they had learnt to rely on themselves, to seek support outside of the home and family, and had discovered their own agency in their identity development:

“I had some kind of inner compass that was telling me to just seek out people who I

felt were inspiring and compassionate and supportive of me,” she said. She was the first in her family to get a college degree and she described the process of applying to college as “horrendous.” She knew instinctively that if she did not have guidance from home, she would need to get it from others. After graduating high school, she chose a small rural college in her home state over an Ivy League school, volunteered for environmental organizations” (San Antonio, 2016 p. 261).

Further, some studies emphasised the perceived constraint in identity development when youth felt inhibited by relationships with peers and friends in rural communities. In some cases, leaving the community enabled a more authentic reimagining of their lives and selves:

“I learned I could truly rely on myself. I learned to be me. Even through the emotional difficulties of that year, it was the true beginning of me. Instead of being around peers who had known me since elementary school . . . I could finally be who I really was, without any prejudgment. I could put my own definition on my life and who I wanted to be” (San Antonio, 2016 p. 261).

Sub-Theme 3: Dual Images

A recurring theme in the literature is youth having “dual images” of their future life and identity (San Antonio, 2016; Corbett, 2007; Rao & Hossain, 2012). Youth in rural communities often feel conflicted between a desire to stay in the local community and a desire to leave:

“[I have] a dual image of the diverging visions I have for myself . . . but now feel like I have to choose between them to progress toward either. One version of me is urbane, sophisticated, highly educated, and highly successful. I’m leading, creating change, and making a name for myself. I’m independent and powerful. I’ve transcended my

origins. The other version is living in the country in a comfortable house on a big piece of land in the woods with a sweet, happy family, living simply, the way I grew up. I'm still involved in the community . . . but my place in life is fairly static. I want both" (San Antonio, 2016 p. 262).

Furthermore, the perceived value of a rural or an urban identity was found to add complexity in the identity development process (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; San Antonio, 2016). Specifically, implicit and explicit assumptions and messages which conveyed information about which type of identity is valued in higher education and prestigious institutions. Studies found that an urban identity is often more valued than a rural identity in higher education, leading youth in rural areas to feel that they have fewer identity choices as they have limited access to higher education and opportunities (Webb et al., 2015; Fataar, 2010; Bachechi, 2015; San Antonio, 2016). Additionally, rural identity was linked to familial and community roles and responsibilities these youth undertake growing up:

"We garden a lot so I kind of know how to take care of things more than people who live in towns. . . . I have lots of responsibilities that I wouldn't get in the city" (Shepard & Marshall, 2000 p. 162).

". . . with the baby-sitting, and with the little odd jobs, you need to show a lot of responsibility, because it's sort of like, a one-time thing, and if you don't show responsibility then you don't get called back again. Word definitely gets around in a small town" (Shepard & Marshall, 2000 p. 162).

Sub-Theme 4: School Context and Teacher Influence

Youth spend a significant amount of time in school, which often serves as a community hub in rural areas. Several studies identified that the school environment and teachers play key roles in identity development (Holt, 2012; Elder et al. 1996). Schools can either support or constrain identity development. Positive identity growth was shown to occur

when teachers introduced new ideas and activities, and encouraged exploration of these in terms of identity implications:

“I made it to uni because I’d been dreaming university dreams since the end of Year 10 and because teachers at school took the time to feed those dreams, to whet my appetite for culture and ideas, and to sustain my love of learning” (Holt, 2012 p. 934).

In contrast, some studies found unintentional identity shaping by schools. Teacher expectations, peer norms, and school selection practices were all found to contribute to identity development in unintentional ways. A few studies highlighted the importance of teachers understanding their own influences in the post-school choices of their students, as well as understanding the complex process of how students make their choices.

Identity development involves exploration of different possible identities (Erikson, 1986). Several studies highlighted that youth in rural areas experienced more complexities around their identity construction than their urban counterparts. Some studies found that these complexities arose as rural communities restructured, and youth were therefore having to navigate new life courses that are different to their parents and justify their choices, to themselves and others. This contributes to the difficulty for youth in rural communities to be able to imagine their future lives and identity as they are required to become active self-constructors without a clear identity blueprint (Corbett, 2007).

Compounding this, in some rural communities, limited exposure to diverse experiences and people, coupled with an expectation to conform to community norms, limits opportunities to explore different identities. Additionally, youth often face difficult choices around staying or leaving, which can lead to additional social emotional and financial stress during their identity development as young adults (Elder et al. 1996; Esveld, 2004; Beasley, 2016; San Antonio, 2016, Fataar, 2010):

“I thought I had everything decided, and then, a lot of things changed ... thing's

affecting where I want to go to college at, like--whether I want to stay around Iowa or leave. or yeah” (Esveld, 2004 p. 97).

The literature suggested that students from rural communities could benefit from support to imagine and prepare for their transition out of school and on to their future life (San Antonio, 2016; Elder et al. 1996).

In summary, for youth in rural areas the complex identity development and aspirations for higher education is often tied to their ability to imagine themselves living in a different place, as well as, in higher education (San Antonio, 2016).

Discussion

The systematic review literature highlighted the highly contextualised nature of the studies and findings, as well as the many different methodologies, research designs, and theoretical underpinnings in this area of research. In the thematic analysis I presented collective understandings from the literature within each theme and contrasted these generalisations with differentiated findings. Generalisations are important as they allow for patterns to be seen; however, the differentiated findings remind us also of the importance of understanding different contexts in rural research when developing interventions and policy solutions. In this section, I will discuss the current state of the literature, suggest implications for future research and summarise findings in each theme.

Current State of the Literature

The qualitative research literature generally consisted of single case studies set in specific rural and country contexts. Only six studies were longitudinal. The single case studies provided important nuanced, contextualised, and rich findings; however more longitudinal studies could potentially complement these findings by providing fuller information about

individual youth behaviour and the impacts of certain contexts on youths higher educational and occupational attainment.

Most of the evidence in the review was from USA, Australia, and Canada. There was a limited number of studies from other countries. The research from USA, Australia, and Canada has contributed much valuable and important knowledge, however, more research from different country contexts, for example developing countries would be valuable to bring different understandings and perspectives into this field.

Higher education aspirations of youth in rural areas was well-researched. Most of the studies in the systematic review focused on youth's higher education aspirations. Occupation aspirations were considered to a lesser extent, mainly in relation to income and employment opportunities of the rural area. A focus on occupation aspirations would be useful in future studies to more fully understand the relationship between higher education aspirations and occupation aspirations. Higher education and occupation attainment were only considered in the limited number of retrospective studies.

A large proportion of the studies had a focus on students from rural areas who were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This was another well researched area in the literature. This focus aligns with the data showing lower rates of participation in higher education of youth with the cumulative disadvantage of living in a rural area and coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The review highlighted the many challenges to education and occupation success for youth from lower income families living in declining rural areas. Future research could benefit from further examining the diversity of youths' backgrounds, such as farming and migrant backgrounds. Also, there was a tendency across the studies to view youth living in rural areas as a homogenous group, including youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rather than more fully considering the heterogeneity of youth in rural areas.

The methodological quality of the studies overall was good, yet the systematic review

did highlight that the criteria related to reflexivity of the researcher was generally not met. In some cases, it was unclear if it was omitted in the research method or whether reflexivity of the researcher had occurred but wasn't stated in the published study. Reflexivity is important in all research to prevent unintended misrepresentations in the findings of the research, leading to policy and interventions which are ineffective. Reflexivity in rural research assists researchers to be mindful of unintentionally privileging urban values and discourses, and to be aware of any deeply held beliefs and assumptions about rural ways of being and knowing which in turn can shape their research design and findings.

Most studies were prospective and provided valuable insights into the factors influencing youth as they form their higher education and occupation aspirations. A small number of studies were retrospective and involved participants who had either finished higher education, were currently in higher education, or had been working for a few years. Youth may to some degree be unaware of the impact that class, poverty, and geography has on them at the time of their growing up. Therefore, more retrospective studies are needed to further understand how youth are constrained or enabled in both their higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment through participants reflection on their lived experience that is only possible retrospectively later in life.

A large proportion of the studies were based in the education discipline, however, there were also several studies which were interdisciplinary. The interdisciplinary studies more fully reflected the understanding that the development of educational aspirations and attainment happen within the social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic contexts of a particular "place." The studies provided understandings on how these contexts influence educational opportunities and expectations for youth in rural areas. Whilst youth's higher education aspirations were researched well within the education discipline, the interdisciplinary studies highlighted how social sciences as a collective endeavour in rural research can assist with both social and economic understandings and development. More

interdisciplinary research in the future could be beneficial not only in the area of equitable higher education participation and attainment but for rural regeneration and development.

The two most stated theoretical perspectives were Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital to analyse the who and the where of students' aspirations, and Erikson's identity development model to analyse influences that impacted on a student's identity. However, the depth of engagement varied. The following theories and perspectives were also drawn on: motivational and self-efficacy theories; ecological and life course development frameworks; self-determination theory; achievement motivation theory; spatialised knowledges; constructivist paradigms; social ecological and cultural ecological theories; anthropological perspective; human capital theory; Durkheim's theory of social cohesion; ethnic enclave theory; cultural psychology perspective; theories of subjectivity; expectancy value theory; interpretive and participatory paradigms, and theoretical considerations of place.

In summary, to improve the evidence base in this field, future research could include studies of diverse rural contexts across a range of countries, including both developed and developing nations, and more fully consider the heterogeneity of the youth living within them. Simultaneously, this research should focus on the real effects of structures (rural and urban) that shape (enable or constrain) youths higher education aspirations. That is, focus on the interactions between structures and human agency, with the aim of revealing any unjust structures or systems. In addition, a mix of single case and longitudinal studies, prospective and retrospective, as well as more interdisciplinary studies will improve the evidence base in this field. Interdisciplinary studies, combining the areas of economics, sociology, geography, and political, could be useful.

Implications for Future Research

As can be seen from this systematic review much important research in this area has been undertaken and is continually advancing our understandings of what influences higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas. The

systematic review also drew our attention to the complexity involved in undertaking research in this area that is both localised and contextualised, whilst at the same time can provide general findings. There appears to be a need for a framework on which future qualitative analysis can be based to further understand and build on contextualised findings whilst generating collective understandings that can lead to the development of practical solutions.

The thematic analysis was structured by theme for the purpose of clarity, however each of the themes were interrelated and at times were mutually reinforcing (Figure 5.1 *Interrelationships of Key and Emerging Themes*). The interrelationships between themes intersected with the structure of rural and individual contexts influencing higher education and occupation aspiration and attainment for youth in rural areas in different ways and with different outcomes.

For example, in one study in Norway males had a strong attachment to place and tended to choose to remain in their rural community post-school even though the rural community was in economic decline. This interrelated with their capital gain, resulting in limiting earning capacity as they worked in traditional unskilled labour jobs. There were no local higher education institutions which meant that they could not participate in higher education if they remained in their community, reinforcing their choice of work. The social and structural systems of the local communities' beliefs, norms, and expectations also influenced and reinforced identity development as traditional males who enjoyed the traditional rural lifestyle, and at the same time reinforced perceived risks of leaving the community and losing their sense of belonging and rural lifestyle. It appeared that many males chose not to engage in school as they did not want to leave the area and so did not see the need to do well at school. Neoliberal discourses which position students with lower grades as being less able and "not smart" contributed to reinforcing the notion that they were not people who went on to higher education but were suited to traditional labour jobs.

In contrast, females in the same rural community did not express the same strong

attachment to place and developed “college-going” identities, which was reinforced by the gendered employment structures which meant there was a lack of local work for females and so for a female to earn a salary they needed to leave their rural community. Their perceived risks, including being unemployed, were greater if they stayed in the local community than if they left, so this in turn reinforced an identity of someone who leaves the community and goes on to higher education. As a result, many females were more engaged in school and pursued higher grades, neoliberal educational discourses then reinforced that they were “smart” and were people who went on to higher education. However, within both the male and female groups there were examples of males who went on to higher education and females who choose to stay in the rural community (Hovdhaugen, Vibe, & Seland, 2017).

The six key and emerging themes I identified lend themselves to analysis of both structures in rural areas affecting youths’ choices and human agency. In other words, the framework allows for analysis of how youth are active in constructing their own aspirations, while being shaped (constrained or enabled) by the structures of rural and urban. These interrelated themes can provide a framework on which future qualitative research analysis in this area can be based to assist with a robust approach to analysis of localised and contextualised qualitative data that can be understood as part of a collective body to generate understandings and explanations leading to practical solutions.

The following section briefly outlines some collective findings, differing contextual findings, and areas for further research within each theme.

Collective Findings Overview and Future Directions

Capital

Capital was a well-researched theme across most of the studies in the systematic review. Social capital, followed by economic and cultural capital, was researched the most. Symbolic capital was less well researched. The literature often focused on how the cumulative disadvantage in economic, social, and cultural capital among poorer families negatively

impacted on higher education aspirations and attainment. In contrast to these findings, a study in rural Wales found that youth from backgrounds with limited economic, cultural, and social capital—characterised by poverty, a lack of higher education within the family, and limited social networks—were able to acquire new cultural capital. This occurred through a focus on self-improvement and learning encouraged by the community narrative that emphasised the importance of higher education. This learning enabled them to obtain more institutionalised forms of cultural capital and to aspire to and attain higher education (Baker & Brown, 2008). An area for future research would be to consider how capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) shapes higher education aspirations and attainment differently in relation to individual youth characteristics in diverse rural contexts.

Social capital was the most well researched. Most studies tended to report that youth living in rural areas who had access to social capital in terms of their social networks and knowledge were more likely to aspire to higher education. Another generalization found in the research was that youth from minority and underrepresented backgrounds, including youth in rural areas, often lack social capital concerning accessing and attaining higher education.

However, it is essential to note that much of the research tended to draw on a normative conceptualization of social capital without fully interrogating the complexity of the conditions and processes involved in obtaining and converting social capital into cultural and economic capital, and by whom. And in particular, tended not to examine social capital in terms of exclusion, as well as inclusion. In other words, many studies tended to adopt a deficit approach to social capital for students from rural areas. However, one study conducted in the specific context of a rural ethnic enclave with second generation Hmong contrasted this finding. The study found that the unique social capital gained from the structure of the enclave provided positive influences on educational attainment as it acted as a shield from the dominant culture of discrimination (Paiva, 2016).

One area for further research would be to understand differential access to social

capital and mediation association of social capital and youths' aspirations for higher education, with consideration to different forms of social capital and intersecting social group attributes.

Economic capital was also a fairly well-researched area in the literature with the main finding that being poor was a constraint on higher education aspiration and attainment. This was in part due to limiting resources and therefore limiting choice to aspire to higher education as it was perceived to be unobtainable. However, in certain contexts being poor was also complicated by gender and culture. For example, in the context of rural Bangladesh the decision to support girls' education was found to be tied up in complex ways with finding a marriage partner. Families from poor backgrounds were found to have less access to education, and so a good marriage was a priority (Del Franco, 2014).

Cultural capital was examined to varying degrees within many studies. Educational cultural capital was the most well researched in the studies. A common finding was the positive influence on youth in rural areas when their family had higher education cultural capital. However, it was also noted that some families who valued higher education positively influenced aspirations, regardless of their own educational levels. Notably, Australian male youth in booming mining towns were less likely to aspire to higher education, regardless of whether there was higher education cultural capital in the family or not, demonstrating the role of context. Other aspects such as embodied and objectified cultural capital and habitus were less well researched. Further research is needed in this area to consider how rural deficit discourses and urban privileging may impact on higher education aspirations and attainment. Another area for further research is symbolic capital and power in relation to the influence on youths' higher educational aspirations and attainment.

Identity Development

Identity development was fairly well researched, particularly in the areas of family, peers, community, and school environments, including teacher influence. A common finding

across the studies was that relationships with family, school, and peers play an important role in shaping youth identity, especially in relation to their aspirations and expectations of higher education. Furthermore, positive relationships with family and friends were found to be vital, providing a foundation for youth to construct a well-developed personal, social, and academic identity (Senior & Chenhall, 2012; San Antonio, 2016). Another common finding was that identity construction is complex for youth in rural communities, as they must navigate their residential, education, and occupational aspirations. A unique finding was the differing strength and nature of rural identities among youth, depending on their roles and responsibilities within their families and communities. The sub-themes of dual identities and rural versus urban identities are areas for further research.

Place and Rurality

Place and rurality were researched to varying degrees in the studies. The sub-themes identified in the thematic analysis included place identity, residential aspirations, physical environment, and geography and rural contextual variability. Both place identity and residential aspirations were fairly well researched in relation to attachment to place, sense of belonging, and migration effects. The sub-themes of physical environment, geography, and rural contextual variability were less well researched.

The thematic analysis highlighted the complexity in examining “rurality” and its influence on higher educational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas. Several studies provided descriptions of the rural context in which the study took place and focused on the family and community relationships to examine “rurality.” However, only a very small number of studies attempted to explore in-depth the impact of the physical environment and geography (climate), as well as spatial impacts as a distinct influence on youths thinking and behaviour. Climate change is a major concern globally, and many rural areas experience firsthand the devastating effects of this on farming and living conditions, and yet droughts, and other extreme weather was rarely mentioned in the studies. One area for

further research is to understand how different physical environments and geographical contexts influence youth's aspirations for and attainment of higher education.

Social and Structural Systems

Social and Structural systems impacts were researched to varying degrees in the literature, with a particular focus on the human social systems of family and peers. A key finding was that in small tight-knit communities, family and peer influences significantly affect youths' aspirations and attainment of higher education, both positively and negatively. Additionally, the literature suggests that these influences are more pronounced when multiple members convey consistent messages or expectations. Conversely, conflicting messages and expectations often lead to tension. Another common finding was that the mothers influence was typically the strongest in the family. In contrast, however, one rural American study based in a farming community found that fathers had a stronger influence on their sons (Funnell, 2008). Additionally, another study highlighted that the grandparents influence was strongest, particularly on youth from certain backgrounds, including First Nations youth. This influence was especially strong where the youth lived with or were close to their grandparents, and in communities where community living was the norm (Senior & Chenhall, 2012).

The broader social system of education was another well researched theme. This research primarily focused on youths' school experiences and perceptions, examining factors such as access to education, disparities in resources between urban and rural schools, teacher influence, and the role of schools in rural communities. The literature presents mixed findings, reflecting the varied ways in which different educational experiences influence youth's aspirations for higher education.

Research on how different patterns of relationships within rural communities either enhance or constrain youths' aspirations for higher education is limited. Studies identified varied youth narratives that express differing attitudes towards their small rural communities,

highlighting complex contextual relationships relating to community beliefs, norms and expectations. This is an area for further research.

Rural restructuring and the impact on local economies was also less well researched, despite being referred to in many studies. This research focus was found in only a small number of studies, which examined higher educational aspirations in relation to the local employment structure. The studies indicated that rural restructuring impacts the higher education aspirations of youth in rural communities in various ways, influenced by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the nature of youths' relationships with family and community.

Risk

Risk was identified as an important emerging theme. The thematic analysis identified three main areas of perceived and actual risk; financial, social, and employment risks, which were researched to varying degrees. In the more recent studies, it was well documented that for students living in rural areas these perceived and actual risks were higher, as in most cases the youth must make the decision to relocate to a city as well as decide to undertake higher education for three or more years. Financial risk and fear of taking on a debt for higher education was a common finding. However, the fear of debt was found to vary according to the youths' circumstances. For example, in some studies of youth from poorer backgrounds in rural America, this fear influenced youth to still go on to higher education but to choose a lower cost community college (Tieken, 2016).

In another study in rural India, the fear of debt for higher education was found to be stronger if the family was in a lower position within the class hierarchies, deterring some youth from higher education. This was primarily due to the fear of not gaining employment to pay back the debt due to the difficulty in improving social positioning, even with a higher education qualification (Rao, 2010)

Social risk, such as loss of friendship and support networks, was well researched in

more recent studies. Many studies revealed that youth were worried about losing their friends and the challenge of making new ones if they moved away for higher education. However, an Australian study found that some youth were keen to leave behind friends they found constraining. They wanted to choose friends based on common interests, rather than maintaining friendships just because they grew up together in a small community (Corra, 2105). An area for further research, is to further understand youths fear of losing a rural identity, changing social class, and becoming someone different to their family and friends.

Globalisation and Neoliberalism

Globalisation and neoliberalism were the least well researched themes across the studies in the review. Globalisation and neoliberalism were explicitly examined and identified in only a couple of studies, however, my thematic analysis identified impacts and influences of globalisation and neoliberalism within the youths' narratives across nineteen studies. Rural restructuring as an impact of globalisation was researched the most within this theme. The sub-theme neoliberal policies and educational discourses was only explicitly discussed in one study, however, evidence of the influence of discourses around educational meritocracy, individualisation, choice, migration, legitimate categories of being (rural deficit and urban privileging), and discourses of dualism were readily identifiable in the analysis.

The thematic analysis of the more recent studies highlighted a natural absorption of these discourses by youth, as well as the complexity these brought for youth in rural areas related to higher education and occupation aspiration and attainment. For example, the analysis showed that youth understood that gaining a degree leads to societal perceptions of success compared to peers without degrees. However, it is less well researched and documented how youth understood the impacts of structural inequalities, such as lack of access to higher education, on their aspirations and attainment. Further research is needed to examine the impact of neoliberal education and economic policies, and their associated discourses, on aspirations and attainment for youth in rural areas.

Geography Matters: Collective and Differential Findings

The thematic analysis and subsequent discussion emphasise the differential findings within the collective findings demonstrating why context matters. Each study was conducted in a rural community and focused on youth living in those communities, and yet different effects were found in each of the six themes and sub-themes, both across the literature and within individual studies

Critically, collective understandings and patterns of the effects of geography, the structure of rural, on higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment of youth in rural areas could be found. Additionally, geography was shown to be important in relation to infrastructure and resources of a community including schooling, economic resources, employment, and access to higher education.

However, the review also highlighted the differing contextualised effects of geography, and the importance of understanding the heterogeneity of youth and diversity of rural areas. The differential findings across the many specific single study qualitative investigation contexts showed the complexity of inter-relational factors and influences on higher educational aspirations and attainment for these youth. Emphasising the need to not only consider generalised findings, but also contextualised findings, when developing interventions and policy solutions in rural research.

Limitations of the Research Reviewed

Overall, the evidence base concerning higher educational and occupational aspirations and attainment for youth living in rural areas is growing, as the topic has recently drawn increasing attention. Most studies were good quality; however, with some apparent weaknesses, notably unstated theoretical framing and limited specific single study investigation contexts. Though the research was conducted worldwide, a significant number of studies were from the USA and Australia. Whilst fewer in number, studies also originated

from twenty further countries, signalling an increasing global interest. Despite these limitations, the included studies provided a sufficient body of evidence in response to the systematic review questions to build a framework on which future qualitative studies can be analysed.

Limitations of Systematic Review

My systematic review is subject to certain methodological limitations. For example, terms related to higher education, occupation, aspirations, attainment, rural and youth are referenced variably in the literature. Although I used a variety of terms to create a comprehensive search, some relevant records may not have been captured. Additionally, the database search was limited to English-language, potentially excluding significant publications in other languages. It is also important to note that publication bias in the literature is well documented and can introduce bias in systematic reviews (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Furthermore, as a formal systematic review, I followed defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, which may have led to the exclusion of some potentially relevant research. For instance, although outside the scope of my review, quantitative research provides important information for understanding youths' aspirations for, and attainment of higher education.

Conclusion

My systematic review clearly illustrates the complexity of researching the aspirations and attainment of higher education and occupations for youth living in rural areas across the world today. I presented collective understandings of the data reported in the 108 studies included in this review and organised them into six key and emerging themes: capital, risk, social and structural systems, place/rurality, globalisation and neoliberalism, and identity development. During my thematic analysis I experienced the problematic nature of being able

to bring together different nuanced qualitative findings to produce collective understandings and explanations. As a response I developed a framework (of the six key themes) which I propose can be used as a base for future qualitative analysis in this area of research.

I propose that this framework of interrelated themes provides a comprehensive and consistent approach to the analysis of future localised and contextualised qualitative data, which . This approach is conducive to building collective understandings and explanations, offering a range of understandings and insights that can assist in developing solutions designed to provide youth in rural areas with real choices to aspire to and attain higher education. Youth living in rural areas are living in a period of adaptation in the world with climate change, globalisation, neoliberal policies and discourses, technological advances (Artificial Intelligence), and worldwide pandemics, all of which impact disproportionately on education and employment for youth in rural areas creating a concentration of disadvantage. I hope that this proposed framework will not only lay the foundation for future research analysis but will also contribute to robust qualitative research being undertaken as a collective endeavour by the social science community.

CHAPTER 6: GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

General Discussion

This chapter discusses the main findings and considers possible explanations and additional likely important factors in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations, drawing on the findings from Chapter 3: Differential Effects of Geography and Social Group Backgrounds on Youths' Social Capital, Chapter 4: Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations: A Mediation Analysis, and Chapter 5: A Qualitative Systematic Review. However, first I provide an overview of my results.

Overview of Results

The overarching aim of this thesis was to explore the role and importance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. To achieve this aim two empirical quantitative studies were conducted as part of mixed method research project.

Study 1 (Chapter 3) a quantitative intersectional study aimed to quantify the amounts and types of social capital experienced by youth in different geographic locations (urban, provincial and remote). I hypothesised that youth living in urban areas would have more social capital as they have better higher educational outcomes. I found statistically and practically significant differences in amounts of social capital between youth in rural and urban areas.

My results did not support all my hypothesis as youth in rural areas were found to have more social capital, four out of the six measures, than youth in urban areas. This suggested the need for a nuanced approach to social capital in my mediation study. That is that it may be the type of social capital rather than the total quantity that matters most when seeking to explain the link between geography and higher education (university) aspirations. Additionally, some significant interactions were found that suggested an intersectional

perspective to social capital and geography is needed. My results imply there is no one rural experience, rather various social positions intersect with geography to give rise to a range of experiences. The interactions were however small.

Study 2 (Chapter 4) a quantitative study aimed to quantify differences in higher education aspirations for youth in rural and urban Australia and quantify the social capital mediation association (size and strength). I hypothesised that differences in geographic locations contribute to differences in higher education aspirations for youth. Additionally, I hypothesised that social capital mediates the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. The results showed a large and statistically significant difference between youth in urban and rural areas; youth in rural areas were found to have a significantly lower probability of aspiring to higher education than youth in urban areas. A multilevel mediation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. School connectedness and student-teacher relationship forms of social capital were found to have substantial positive associations with higher education aspirations, school-based activities form of social capital had a smaller positive association, and peer influence form of social capital had a moderate negative association.

Further, school connectedness form of social capital and peer influence form of social capital played a statistically significant role in partially mediating the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. However, the size of mediation was small, explaining only a fraction of the total effect of geography (urban and rural) on higher education (university) aspirations.

Study 3 (Chapter 5) was an empirical qualitative systematic review. It aimed to build collective understandings of the issues and phenomena related to higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment for youth in rural areas. A grounded theory approach was used to thematically analyse the findings of the 108 selected studies. The findings were

reported in terms of six interrelated key and emerging themes: Place/Rurality; Capital; Social and Structural systems; Identity Development; Globalisation and Political Impacts, and Risk. The findings highlighted interactions between individual agency and structures (rural and urban) that can enable or constrain higher education aspirations. Among the themes, social capital emerged as a prominent focus. The studies provided rich, valuable insights into the role and importance of social capital at the individual level; however there appeared to be a normative approach to reporting the benefits of social capital. Additionally, the review findings provided valuable insights into the complex relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural settings in Australia and beyond.

Overall, the quantitative data assisted in providing the big picture of the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations, and the qualitative data provided rich, nuanced insights further developing understandings of this picture, as well as assisting to provide explanations.

General Discussion

My thesis investigated the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations in addressing the critical issue of persistent higher education outcome disparities between youth in rural Australia and their urban counterparts. Aspirations play a pivotal role in shaping education outcomes, additionally there is increasing focus on social capital as an explanatory factor in addressing educational outcome disparities, such as the rural–urban higher education divide. Thus, whilst there are many factors that shape higher education aspirations, I focused on social capital. Therefore, the overarching aim of this thesis was to further understand the role of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. Using a mixed methods research approach, I attempted to bring quantitative and qualitative data together to examine this relationship.

With the goal of education and economic policies being to enable the greatest number

of real choices for people, this study used higher education aspirations as a lens to examine whether youth in rural Australia have the same number of choices as their urban counterparts. In other words, do youth in rural Australia perceive higher education to be a real choice.

There is an extensive literature base on social capital and education, however, there tends to be a focus on general populations and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, with much of the research set within the USA. Research in rural areas of Australia remains understudied. While there is a small body of literature exploring social capital and educational outcomes in rural areas, less research has focused on social capital and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia, as was demonstrated in my systematic review. Additionally, although there is a small but important growing body of literature exploring social capital in the Australian rural context, many of these studies are qualitative and focus on specific rural areas. As such, there is less quantitative research, and even fewer studies use large-scale quantitative studies (Cuervo et al., 2019; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Turner, 2018).

Building on these valuable and important foundational studies, my quantitative studies drew on a large-scale Australian national dataset with the aim of providing generalised macro-level data. This research aimed to offer empirical data on social capital differences experienced by youth in rural and urban Australia, and, crucially, on the role and importance of social capital as a mediating factor in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. This contribution is hoped to enrich the evidence base, specifically, by assisting to determine the degree to which interventions to increase higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia should consider social capital, and the degree to which other likely important factors should be considered.

Additionally, I drew on my systematic review findings to complement these quantitative findings, by offering rich insights as well as identifying other likely important factors in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations.

Social Capital Differences between Youth in Rural and Urban Australia

My study provided evidence that youth in rural Australia experience more social capital in general than their urban counterparts. There are varying perspectives in existing literature, some studies suggest that youth in rural areas have more social capital due to smaller community sizes, while others argue that youth in urban areas have more social capital due to larger populations and a diversity of connections (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Sorensen, 2016; Beggs et al., 1996; Allcott et al., 2007; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). My finding adds to the evidence base aligning with research that suggests youth in rural areas experience more social capital due to the smaller unique infrastructures of rural communities. Additionally, my results offer a differing perspective to many of the qualitative studies in my systematic review, which tended to frame social capital as a resource lacking for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those in rural areas. For example, I found two out of the six forms of social capital favoured youth in urban areas, but four forms favoured youth in rural areas.

Further, my study expands the existing literature on social capital differences for youth in rural Australia by building on important research such as the work of Cuervo et al. (2019) who investigated the impact of various forms of social and cultural capital on post-school educational aspirations in regional Australia. My study quantified and compared various forms of social capital on a national scale for youth in rural and urban Australia using a large-scale dataset. My findings showed that geography predicts differences in the form and amount of social capital youth in rural Australia experience compared to their urban counterparts. For example, my study found that youth in rural areas experienced statistically significant higher amounts of peer influence and volunteering forms of social capital, and less of the school connectedness form of social capital.

Positive and Negative Mediation Associations

Further, my study provided findings on the effects of social capital on the predicted

probability to aspire to higher education, and offered estimations of the mediation association of social capital as a mechanism that links geography to differential higher education aspirations. School connectedness form of social capital and student teacher relationship form of social capital were both strongly associated with higher education aspiration, with a substantial positive association. In contrast, peer influence form of social capital was found to have a moderate negative association with higher education aspirations. These results are consistent with existing research, highlighted in my systematic review, that suggests school related forms of social capital are important for better education outcomes, and with research that suggests strong social ties to peers and family can constrain higher education aspiration for youth in rural areas (Kiuru et al., 2020; Semo & Karmel, 2011; Byun et al., 2012; Corra, 2015; Klärner & Knabe, 2019; Fabiansson, 2006). However, the narratives from my qualitative systematic review data revealed more complex social interactions with parents and friends. These interactions influenced, motivated, set expectations, and provided support in varying degrees and ways, which could both enhance and constrain higher education aspiration for youth in rural areas.

An Important Disparity: Youth in Rural Australia have Less of the Positive Forms of Social Capital and More of the Negative Forms of Social Capital

Moreover, my findings revealed an important disparity; youth in rural Australia experienced less of the forms of social capital that might promote higher education aspirations and more of the forms of social capital that might constrain higher education aspirations. Specifically, out of the social capital measures I explored, youth in rural Australia had significantly less school connectedness and student-teacher relationship forms of social capital, which were the two forms most strongly positively associated with higher education aspirations, and also had significantly more peer influence form of social capital, which was the form most negatively associated with higher education aspirations.

In the qualitative narratives youth in rural areas revealed different feelings towards their teachers and schools. One story that came through, was the perceived lack of support from teachers to consider higher education (university) which reaffirmed their beliefs that it was not a realistic goal for them. This appeared to be compounded by a lack of information and career guidance, as well as a perception that some teachers regarded them to be of lower intelligence because of their “rural” ways of being and doing. In contrast, some youths’ narratives revealed an emotional investment made by teachers and other community members in them, which helped to build an identity that involved the student and their family imagining themselves going on to higher education.

Critically, youth in urban areas were found to experience significantly more of the forms of social capital, school connectedness and student-teacher relationship forms of social capital, which were substantially positively associated with higher education aspirations, while experiencing significantly less peer influence form of social capital, that was the most negatively associated with higher education aspirations. These findings contribute to the literature by providing a clearer understanding of the disparities in social capital between youth in rural and urban areas.

Importance of Type of Social Capital for Higher Education Aspirations and the Rural-Urban Relationship

Notably, these findings revealed that the critical factor may not be the amount of social capital, but rather the form (type) and the perceived value of that capital within different social, educational, and geographical contexts. As mentioned in Chapter 3, these findings, informed by my systematic review findings, brought to light the issue of urban privileging in society, which has led to the social stratification of rural, as deficit, and urban, as privileged.

In other words, the cultural norms and preferences of youth in rural areas are often perceived as deficit to urban standards, reinforcing and maintaining the social hierarchy in the

urban-rural relationship. This was evidenced in many of the qualitative narratives. Further, this devaluing of “rural” is situated within broader societal inequalities, such as education systems (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These understandings are consistent with the literature suggesting that the urban-rural divide is a common theme globally, impacting on education outcomes in many countries, including higher income countries such as, USA, Canada, and UK (van Maareseveen, 2021; Trahar, Tremmis, Lucas & Naidoo, 2020; OECD, 2016).

Importance of Social Capital: Mediation Size Smaller than Expected

Importantly, building on these findings, my study provided evidence that social capital was a significant mechanism in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, crucially however, the size of this mediation was found to be substantially smaller than the remaining direct effect of geography. In fact, the size of the mediation was much less than I had expected based on the extensive existing literature on social capital and education outcomes. The small size of mediation explained only a fraction of the total effect of geography (urban and rural) on higher education (university) aspirations. Specifically, the results found that the indirect associations never accounted for more than 1.9% of the total association of geography (urban and rural) on higher education aspirations. These findings indicate that while there is a significant mediating effect, it is relatively small in size, and suggests there are other likely important factors in the relationship.

Interestingly, while the rich qualitative insights from the systematic review emphasised the role and importance of social capital at the individual level, these quantitative findings revealed its limited overall importance when examined on the macro level. The unexpected smaller result potentially draws our attention to the importance of methodological approaches in shaping our understanding of social capital, as well as underscoring the complexity of social capital. Much of the prior research on social capital, particularly in rural contexts, tends to be qualitative and often conducted on a smaller scale, which is invaluable

for in-depth exploration. However, these methodological differences may lead to variations in the perceived impact of social capital. By incorporating a quantitative approach and drawing on a large-scale data set, this study adds a valuable perspective.

Given the interest in social capital in educational interventions, as highlighted in my systematic review with social capital being one of the most researched areas. This finding could potentially be helpful in determining both the degree to which interventions should consider social capital, and the degree to which other factors should be considered in future research and policy.

However, it is worth noting that, as discussed in Chapter 3, within the framework of Bourdieu's theory of social capital, even a small association can have implications in the critical context of education, particularly for youth in rural areas. Further, the findings from my intersectional quantitative study suggested potential diversity in the impact of social capital. For example, my results indicate that first generation youth and youth born overseas in rural areas may still experience substantial impacts from having less of the school related forms of social capital despite the small overall mediation size, compared to other youth for whom it may be less important.

The qualitative insights provided rich explorations of this diversity of impact for youth from diverse backgrounds. The narratives revealed complexity, showing that social processes and capital intersected with various rural contexts and the family backgrounds of youth in rural areas to either enable or constrain their access to social capital and formation of higher education aspirations. For example, youth from families perceived to have higher status in the community, such as farming or professional families, had more access to the limited part-time employment opportunities. In this context, the qualitative data becomes vital, complementing the quantitative findings by offering nuanced narratives that capture the unique ways in which social capital significantly influences the aspirations of specific youth. Together, both forms of data underscore the importance of considering not only macro-level trends but also

individual differences, ensuring that the subtle yet potentially substantial impact of social capital is not overlooked.

Yet, despite this potential, the implementation of effective social capital interventions in rural areas to increase higher education aspirations presents considerable challenges due to the exclusionary aspects of social capital (Webb et al., 2017; Burke et al., 2023; Gamoran, Turley, Turner & Fish, 2012). Accordingly, aligning with research that has problematised the normative approach to social capital, we can see that social capital is an important and worthwhile phenomenon to research, particularly when drawn on as an investigative tool to uncover the social processes, structures and practices of the dominant groups in society, such as urban and high socioeconomic, in constructing systems that maintain their privileges and reproduce advantage (Webb et al., 2017; Burke et al., 2023; Singh & Dika, 2002).

Significant Disparity in Higher Education Aspirations: Youth in Rural Australia Significantly Less Likely to Aspire

Crucially, my study found a strong relationship between geography and higher education aspirations across all the analysis. The results provided clear evidence of a significant disparity in the likelihood to aspire between youth in rural and urban Australia that is hard to overlook, with youth in rural Australia significantly less likely to aspire to higher education. Given the pivotal role of aspirations in determining educational outcomes this is an important finding. The existing literature presents varying perspectives with some research indicating that youth in rural areas have strong aspirations for higher education, however this research tends to be smaller scale studies, whilst other research indicates that youth in rural areas have lower higher education aspirations compared to their urban counterparts (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; James et al., 1999; Curtis et al., 2012). My finding contributes evidence that at the age of fifteen youth in rural Australia are significantly less likely to aspire to higher education than their urban counterparts.

In other words, my study found that geography, rural status, predicts higher education

aspirations. Indicating that the structure of rural has real effects on youths' aspirations. This finding aligns with a significant body of literature indicating that a youth's environment, including geography, plays an important role in influencing aspirations (Fray, Gore, Harris & North, 2020; Cooper, Strathdee & Baglin, 2018; Corbett, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Conger & Elder, 1994)

Youth in Rural Australia Aspire Less to Higher Education Despite Having More Social Capital: Complicating Normative Assumptions of Social Capital

Interestingly, my study revealed that despite experiencing more social capital overall, youth in rural Australia were significantly less likely to aspire to higher education compared to their urban counterparts. This finding offers a differing perspective to the literature on social capital and higher education aspirations in which there is a tendency to draw on the normative explanation that youth in rural areas aspire less to higher education due to having less social capital than their urban counterparts, and therefore argue for interventions that increase social capital as a means of increasing higher education aspirations in these communities (Burke et al., 2023).

My findings provide further evidence that complicates simplistic assumptions that policy and interventions merely need to increase social capital to increase higher education aspirations for youth in rural areas and yet reinforce the continued need to consider social capital as part of a well-rounded intervention and policy approach.

It is worth noting, that a normative approach to social capital, was identified as being the most common approach in my systematic review, however, it has been shown to oversimplify the issue by attributing a failure to aspire to the individual rather than to the underlying structural conditions, (Campbell & Mckendrick, 2017; Burke et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2017). In other words, many marginalised groups, including youth in rural areas, experience unjust forms of educational and economic structures and policies which shape aspirations. Despite this, interventions and policies often focus on changing the individual or

marginalised group without acknowledging these broader underlying structural issues (Ball, 2014).

Additional Likely Important Factors in the Relationship between Geography, Social Capital, and Higher Education Aspirations

As discussed previously, my results indicate that while there is a significant mediating association of social capital, it is relatively small in size, suggesting that there are other likely important factors in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. Building on the premise outlined above, which calls problematising a normative approach and consider the influence of underlying structures on aspirations for youth in rural areas, I will now delve further into my qualitative systematic review findings to explore explanations and other additional likely important factors in this relationship.

Underlying Structural Factors Likely Influencing on Higher Education Aspirations

In my systematic review analysis, underlying structural issues became evident, highlighting the uneven economic development and unequal distribution of resources between rural and urban areas. These factors are likely important in influencing youths' aspirations in rural areas. Specifically, the review analysis emphasised the impact of neoliberal education and economic policies that have prioritised urban areas (Howley, 2007; Burke, 2013; Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011, Orfield, Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Wenham, 2020).

In terms of economic conditions, the systematic review identified several contributing factors to the challenges faced by rural communities, including inadequate infrastructure, limited access to resources such as the internet, public transport, and declining employment markets (Alloway et al., 2004; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Corbett, 2007; Howley, 2007). These economic disparities are reflected in rural education, numerous studies in the systematic review highlighted inequalities faced by youth in accessing education and higher education opportunities compared to their urban counterparts, such as, fewer advanced course offerings in senior secondary schools, less financial resources for schools, fewer experienced

teachers in specialist subjects, and greater distances to higher education institutions. The literature further highlights a stratification in schooling in Australia, with notable differences in resourcing of schools between private and public schooling systems within rural areas (Alloway et al., 2004; Seeberg, 2014; Monk, 2007; OECD, 2019a; Warren & Edwards, 2017).

The review analysis also highlighted that these resourcing disparities are further exacerbated as rural areas often have higher rates of youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to urban areas. As a result, many rural schools, especially government schools, often educate a disproportionately high number of youths from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (RRC, 2011; Brown & Schafft, 2011; James et al., 1999; Curtis, 2011).

Interestingly, my quantitative research found that youth from high socioeconomic backgrounds in each geographic location had more school related social capital than youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This suggests there is likely a cumulative disadvantage of rural location and low socioeconomic background, highlighting a potential area for further investigation into any collective effects of a concentration of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in rural schools on higher education aspirations.

These insights from my systematic review highlight how the privileging of urban norms, values, and capital, can play a significant role in shaping structural factors which are rooted in rural-urban power dynamics and typically benefit urban and higher socioeconomic groups. As a result, allocation of resources and, consequently, the choice to aspire to higher education tends to advantage youth in urban areas and youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, the allocation of economic and educational resources, driven by policy decisions, are likely important factors in shaping higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia. Accordingly, there is a need to consider the rural-urban power dynamics, specifically whose capital is valued, in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, particularly in terms of how dominant groups, urban and high socioeconomic status, may shape policy (Alston & Kent, 2003; Burke et al., 2023).

Transforming Structural Disadvantage into Individual Failure to Aspire

Additionally, my systematic review analysis drew attention to the influence of neoliberal educational discourses on shaping aspirations, such as choice, meritocracy and individualism, alongside the categorisation of rural as deficit, which was evident in the narratives of youth, their peers, families and teachers across the reviewed studies (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; Bachechi, 2015). These discourses were shown to affect identity development in relation to educational aspirations.

Specifically, revealing how neoliberal discourses can transform structural disadvantages, such as inadequate school resourcing that may result in lower school outcomes, into perceived individual failures through discourses that faults the individual, for example, they weren't "bright" enough or didn't work hard enough, leading to a misrecognition of capability (Burke et al., 2017). It was evident from many studies how youth in rural areas internalised these narratives and embodied ways of being, leading to a sense of identity and a trajectory of "someone like me" doesn't go to university (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; Bachechi, 2015).

Recent literature has emphasised that for many youth in rural communities there is a deeply embedded sense that higher education is something that was out of their reach in terms of their own academic abilities (O'Shea et al., 2019). This process can be seen as a form of symbolic violence and can be particularly harmful in close-knit rural communities through the strong influence of peers, families and wider community who may unintentionally reinforce this narrative and belief (Bourdieu; et al., 1992; Webb et al., 2017; Bagley, 2023; Corbett, 2007).

Navigation of Social Processes and Structures Influencing Higher Education Aspirations

It is within this complex environment of social processes and structures that youth from rural areas navigate and shape their aspirations, including higher education aspirations. The findings across the studies in my systematic review demonstrated that youth in rural areas

form diverse aspirations, including various educational and career paths. However, through my analysis of the interrelated themes it could be seen that as youth become aware of the geographical, educational, and financial constraints associated with pursuing higher education, and experience symbolic violence, they may modify their aspirations to align with what seems more realistic. This modification reflects what MacLeod (2009) describes as ‘levelled aspirations’ where systemic barriers shape and constrain youths educational and career goals to what youth perceive as achievable. In other words, their aspirations are influenced by the perceived likelihood of achieving those aspirations which are intricately linked to social processes and structures, and the availability of opportunities (Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011; Nussbaum, 2011; Appadurai, 2004; Sen, 1979; Jaremus, Sincok, Patfield, Prieto, Fray, & Gore, 2022; MacLeod, 2009). That is, there is a mediation of youths’ desired futures by their perception of what is possible.

Consequently, a crucial question arises: Are youth in rural Australia afforded the same choices that enable them to aspire to higher education similarly to their urban counterparts?

Do Youth in Rural Australia Have the Same Choice To Aspire to Higher Education?

My study found that youth in rural Australia were significantly less likely to aspire to higher education than youth in urban areas. Across my studies there was mixed evidence that social capital was a major driver of this association. Regardless of the study it was clear that social capital itself was not enough to account for the totality of the association between rural status and aspirations. Above I describe several additional potential mechanisms. A way of potentially summarising all of these mechanisms however is to consider if the association is rooted in not having the same choice sets as urban youth that include higher education as a realistic option. That is, by middle adolescence rural youth’s aspirations have been adjusted to a more constrained choice set than urban youth which is reflected in my findings. Thus, geography, and the structure of rural, matters for higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia.

Strengths and Limitations

I adopted a mixed method approach including both quantitative and qualitative studies, which has been shown to be beneficial for studying social capital (Woolcock & Nyhan Jones, 2008). By drawing on large-scale datasets the use of a quantitative methodology was crucial in providing generalised findings at the macro level for these rural and urban populations allowing for the identification of disparities and patterns of inequities. The quantitative results in this thesis were important as they provided clear and consistent evidence that is hard to overlook in relation to disparities in higher education aspirations and social capital between youth in rural and urban Australia, as well as providing empirical evidence on the size and strength of the mediation association in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. The qualitative data assisted to further develop understandings of these disparities and patterns, and in explaining why these may be so.

These findings would not have been possible with qualitative methods alone and were invaluable to having deeper understandings of the research problem. In particular, drawing attention to the fact that although social capital is of increasing interest to policy makers and educational researchers, as well as finding social capital to be one of the most researched factors in my systematic review, the actual size of the social capital mediation association was found to be substantially smaller than expected suggesting a possible over emphasis on social capital strategies.

My study also had some limitations that should be considered. For the quantitative studies, the LSAY 2003 dataset was of vital importance in providing valuable insights into social capital in the relationship between youth and higher education aspirations. The fundamental elements of social capital are deeply rooted in human behaviour and so the effects I observed in the studies are likely true for contemporary youth in rural Australia.

Further, while my quantitative studies incorporated elements of intersectionality and

were able to account for several important background factors there were also limitations within the quantitative methodology. Importantly, my results were able to provide findings on practically and statistically significant interactions to reveal nuance and complexity in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. However, it would be useful to be able to do further qualitative intersectional investigation to investigate these interactions further to fully explore the ways in which social structures and systemic oppressions intersect and shape higher education aspirations and outcomes for youth from different social backgrounds in rural Australia.

Furthermore, in my quantitative studies I worked with urban, provincial, and remote groupings of students. This is important to be able to provide generalisable results allowing for persistent patterns of inequity to be seen in relation to higher education aspirations. However, I acknowledge the varied nature and diversity of youth and their rural communities in Australia. As previously discussed, it is not my intention to homogenise rural areas however it is important to quantitatively examine the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations due to the use of social capital and higher education aspiration discourses that often normalise urban life while “othering” rural life (Cuervo et al., 2019). A quantitative approach was essential as it provided generalised findings and quantification of the strength and significance of relationships between variables providing valuable insights about the geographic areas and groups of people for which these results were valid. These findings would not be possible with qualitative methods alone.

As previously discussed, social capital, a central focus in this research, is undeniably complex and multifaceted, as evidenced by diverse conceptualisations in previous studies (Lareau, 2001; Portes, 1998). This complexity has led to challenges in measurement, attracting critiques of oversimplification and under-theorisation (Collier, 2002). However, despite challenges in quantitative measurement, exploring this concept remains crucial because it is a significant and real phenomenon within social structures (Portes, 1998). I

sought to navigate measurement difficulties by drawing on the expertise of the NCVER for the social capital constructs and data items in the LSAY 2003 dataset. Additionally, as previously noted, a mixed method approach to social capital is helpful for reaching understandings (Woolcock & Nyhan Jones, 2008). This research, acknowledging measurement complexities, adopted an approach blending scientific and philosophical perspectives to explore this important social phenomenon (Ostrom & Ahn, 2003). By using social capital as a lens to uncover the social processes, structures, and practices that maintain privileges around a social group, this research potentially contributes to the broader understanding of social capital (Webb et al., 2017).

Additionally, I experienced a constraint due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was unable to complete the data collection for my initially planned descriptive qualitative study, necessitating a redesign of the third study (See Appendix C: Re-design of Thesis in Response to the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic). This study was initially designed to explore areas identified in the quantitative study that may require further investigation, with the aim of providing a more nuanced understanding of how geographic, socio-cultural, and economic factors may influence higher education aspirations and outcomes for youth from different backgrounds in different types of rural areas. To address this limitation, the proposed study could be conducted as future research to enhance the insights gained from this research.

Future Research and Potential Policy Implications

Having explored the complex relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia, it could be potentially helpful to draw on these insights for possible future research and policy implications.

The findings from my quantitative studies along with my systematic review analysis highlight that geography matters in shaping higher education aspirations, as well as providing a clearer picture of the role and importance of social capital, suggesting a possible

overreliance on social capital interventions. Additionally, the findings brought our attention to other likely factors, specifically to the urban-rural relationship, and the devaluing of rural, which in turn shapes policies and distribution of resources, and consequently choices for youth in rural Australia. In other words, geography is a critical factor that shapes resources and choice, that either enables or constrains attainment of higher education and therefore influences aspirations for youth (Elder & Conger, 2000).

Thus, from a policy perspective the structure of rural is important to understand as it can have real impacts on youths' aspirations. However, research exploring geography and higher education for youth in rural Australia continues to be limited (Cook, Burke, Bunn & Cuervo, 2022). Therefore, more research is warranted to not only understand rural areas in Australia, but also importantly, the rural-urban relationship, and the associated power dynamics.

Additionally, it could be helpful to undertake interdisciplinary systems level research, such as policy review, to focus on inequitable structural issues impacting rural areas, and thereby limiting choice. For example, equitable resourcing of schools, valuing of rural knowledges, capital, and ways of being in education, access to higher education institutions, access to resources such as the internet, and employment opportunities.

At the same time, although policy is crucial in driving structural changes, its effectiveness can be enhanced when it is supported by a cultural shift within society. Thus, it could be useful to further explore the concept of capital, specifically whose capital is valued in society and education. This research could be helpful in redefining the urban rural relationship and disrupting the maintenance of privilege associated with higher education outcomes by dominant groups, such as urban and high socioeconomic.

Additionally, as my findings indicated low socioeconomic status is also of significance in the relationship between geography, social capital, and higher education aspirations. This is important to note as many rural areas are also of low socioeconomic status. However not

much is known about the causal link between rurality and low socioeconomic status.

Therefore, it could be helpful to explore this further.

Conclusion

In conclusion, geography matters. Geography is a critical factor that shapes not only development of aspirations, but also resources and choices that impact on youth as they attempt to implement their post school plans (Elder & Conger, 2000). In my study, geography predicted higher education aspiration and social capital differences between youth in rural Australia and their urban counterparts. Additionally, social capital was found to be a significant mechanism in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, crucially however, the size of this mediation was substantially smaller than the remaining direct effect of geography. Given the small size, coupled with the difficulty in implementing effective social capital interventions due to its complexity, there is a possible overreliance on social capital interventions designed to mediate educational disparities for youth in rural areas. However, social capital remains important to consider as part of a well-rounded intervention and policy approach, particularly when a social reproduction approach is taken.

Critically, clear evidence was provided of a significant disparity in the likelihood to aspire between youth in rural and urban Australia that is hard to overlook, with youth in rural Australia significantly less likely to aspire to higher education. Thus, indicating that they may not perceive higher education to be a real choice. As such, it may potentially be helpful to consider if the association between rural status and higher education aspirations is rooted in not having the same choice sets as urban youth than include higher education as a realistic option. Hence, it is suggested that consideration needs to be given to other likely important factors in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations, specifically

the urban-rural relationship and associated power dynamics, which in turn shapes policies, resource distribution, and consequently choices for youth in rural Australia.

Therefore, from an educational research and policy development perspective, geography matters. Accordingly, it is suggested that future research should focus on structural factors, such as equitable resourcing of schools, access to higher education institutions, access to resources such as the internet, and employment opportunities. The goal being to inform the development of equitable policies that provide youth in rural areas with a real choice to aspire to and access higher education.

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¹ References used for quotes are marked with a *

APPENDIX A

Table 5.0

Systematic Search of Evidence and Results

Concepts: Aspirations + Rural Areas + Education OR Occupation

Limits: Peer reviewed

Search in Abstract, Title and Subject

Data base	Date	Actual Search Strategy	Search Results	Number of Accepted Documents
ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global	27/02/2018	(Rural*) AND (aspiration* or Education*) AND (aspiration*OR attainment OR achievement)	65	65
Simultaneous search: SocINDEX with full text; ERIC; Education Source; PsychINFO & Academic Search Complete	27/02/2018	(Rural* OR SU rural* OR AB rural*) AND (education* OR occupation*) OR SU (education* OR occupation*) OR AB (education* OR occupation) AND ((aspiration*) OR SU (aspiration*) OR AB (aspiration*))	1046	1046
A+ Education	27/02/2018	(Rural*) AND (education* OR occupation*) AND ((aspiration*))	98	98
Web of Science (science and social science)	16/03/2018	(“Youth* AND *Education” AND “Aspiration” AND *Rural)	86	86

Data base	Date	Actual Search Strategy	Search Results	Number of Accepted Documents
ProQuest Political Science Complete	16/03/2018	Ab(rural*) AND ab(education* OR occupation*) AND ab(aspiration*)	14	14
ProQuest Research	16/03/2018	Ab(rural*) AND ab(education* OR occupation*) AND ab(aspiration*)	27	20
ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection	16/03/2018	(ab(rural*) AND ab(education* OR occupation*) AND ab(aspiration*)) OR (su(rural*) AND su(education* OR occupation*) AND su(aspiration*)) OR (ti(rural*) AND ti(education* OR occupation*) AND ti(aspiration*))	33	13

Table 5.1*Geographic Regions of Research*

Country	Total	Country	Total
USA	43	Africa Guinea-Bissau	1
Australia	30	Africa Malawi	1
Canada	7	Africa Rwanda	1
More than 1 country	3	Morocco	1
Peru	2	Slovakia	1
Mexico	2	Sweden	1
Bangladesh	2	Norway	1
China	2	UK	1
South Africa	2	Ethiopia	1
India	2	Bahamas	1
South Africa	2	Pakistan	1

Country	Total	Country	Total
Bolivia	1	Philippines	1

Table 1.2*Year of Publication*

Year Article Published	Number
1985 - 1990	1
1990 - 1995	9
1996 - 2000	9
2001 - 2005	11
2006 - 2010	19
2011 - 2015	37
2016 - 2020	20

Table 5.3*Methodology*

Interviews	Focus Groups	Mixed Interview & Focus Groups	Ethnography / Field Work	Case Studies	Surveys/ Questionnaire	Other
41	6	9	20	10	6	16

Other qualitative methods:

Number of Studies	Qualitative Methodology
2	Participant Essays
1	Phenomenology
1	Interviews and local document review
2	Narrative inquiry
1	Interviews and participants self - narrative
1	Interviews and participants presentations
1	Interviews and photovoice-based literacy activities
2	Interviews and participants photographs

Number of Studies	Qualitative Methodology
1	Interviews and community forums
1	Interviews and informal discussions
1	Construction of life-space maps, possible selves and photographic displays
1	Interviews and analysis of letters, personal communications and field visit observations
1	Focus groups and visual participatory activities to explore pathways to resilience

Table 5.4*Type of Study*

Type of Study: Prospective or Retrospective	Number of Studies
Prospective	85
Retrospective	23

Longitudinal Studies

Type of Study: Longitudinal	Number of Studies
Longitudinal	6
	102

Longitudinal Study	Country	Length of Study
Ellis, Bronwyn, Watkinson, Julie, & Sawyer, Janet. (2010). Promoting rural/regional sustainability through the provision of a quality higher education experience.(Report). Education in Rural Australia, 20(2), 17-33.	Australia	4 Years
Holt, B. (2012). Identity matters: The centrality of 'conferred identity' as symbolic power and social capital in higher education mobility. International Journal of Inclusive Education: RECONCEPTUALISING INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION, 16(9), 929-940.	Australian	4 Years
Butler, R., & Muir, K. (2017). Young people's education biographies: Family relationships,	Australian	2 Years

Longitudinal Study	Country	Length of Study
social capital and belonging. <i>Journal of Youth Studies</i> , 20(3), 316-331.		
Pásztor, A. (2018). Destination unknown? Study choices and graduate destinations of Hungarian youth in Slovakia. <i>European Journal of Education</i> , 53(1), 118-127.	Slovakia	4 Years
Shamah, D., & MacTavish, Katherine A. (2009). Looking toward the Future: Examining Aspirations and Sense of Purpose among Rural Youth, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.	America	6 months
Seeberg, V. (2014). Girls' Schooling Empowerment in Rural China: Identifying Capabilities and Social Change in the Village. <i>Comparative Education Review</i> , 58(4), 678-707.	China	12 Years

Table 5.5*Methodological Quality*

CASP Score (out of 10)	Number of Articles	Included (YES / NO)
4	1	NO
5	0	N/A
6	1	YES
7	15	YES
8	63	YES
9	21	YES
10	7	YES

APPENDIX B

Tables 2.2 – 2.6 *Characteristics of the LSAY 2003 cohort***Table 2.2***Geographic Location*

<i>Geographic Location</i>	
Metro	7300
Provincial	2844
Rural	226
TOTAL	10370

Table 2.3*Gender*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Boy %</i>	<i>Girl %</i>
Urban	36.5	35.5
Provincial	13.3	14.1
Remote	0.3	0.3

Table 2.4*Economic, Social and Cultural Status*

<i>ESCS</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SE</i>
Urban	0.72	0.02
Provincial	0.27	0.02
Remote	0.01	0.00
	0.25	0.02

Table 2.5*Indigenous Status*

	<i>Indigenous %</i>	<i>Non-Indigenous %</i>
Urban	1.05	70.95

Provincial	0.81	26.60
Remote	0.03	0.60

Table 2.6*Country of Birth Status**

	First generation: Youth born in Australia to non-Australian parents	Native: Youth born in Australia to Australian born parents	Non-Native: Youth born overseas to non-Australian parents
Urban	10.73	51.63	9.55
Provincial	0.95	25.89	0.66
Remote	0.02	0.55	0.02

*Native: youth born in Australia to Australian born parents

First Generation: youth born in Australia to non-Australian born parents.

Non-Native: youth born overseas to non-Australian born parents

Table 2.7*Categories of the MCEETYA Schools Geographic Location Classification*

MSGLC Category	Code	Sub-category	Criteria	Examples
Metropolitan Area	1.1	State Capital City regions (except Darwin)	All cities pop. \geq 100 000	Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Canberra-Queanbeyan, Cairns, Gold Coast-Tweed, Geelong, Hobart, Newcastle, Townsville, Wollongong
	1.2	Major urban Statistical Districts		
Provincial City	2.1.1	Provincial City Statistical Districts + Darwin	Pop. 25 000 – 99 999	Ballarat, Bathurst-Orange, Burnie-Devonport, Bundaberg, Darwin, Launceston, Portland, Bunbury,
	2.1.2	Provincial City Statistical Districts		
	2.2.1	Inner provincial		

MSGLC Category	Code	Sub-category	Criteria	Examples
Provincial Area		areas	Pop. < 25 000 and CD ARIA Plus score \leq 5.92	Armidale, Busselton, Mt. Gambier, Gympie Dimboola, Huonville
	2.2.2	Outer provincial areas		
Remote Area	3.1	Remote areas	CD ARIA Plus score > 5.92	Port Headland, Cowell, Lightning Ridge, Mataranka, Cloncurry, Cape Barren Island
	3.2	Very Remote areas		

APPENDIX C

REDESIGN OF THESIS IN RESPONSE TO THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID 19

PANDEMIC

“In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic has both widened and exacerbated educational equity issues...”

O’Shea, Koshy, Drane (2021)

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on my original research plans and on rural areas in general, as well as the reasons for redesigning my research plan and details of the redesigned research plan. First, I will outline my original research plans and the originally planned for qualitative descriptive study, including the work that had already been completed. Secondly, I will briefly discuss impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic on rural areas, including the worsening of educational inequalities for youth. Next, I will outline the constraints on data collection for my original descriptive qualitative study due to the COVID 19 pandemic and the reasons for redesigning the study. Finally, I will describe the redesigned quantitative, intersectional longitudinal study.

Original Plan: Study Three Descriptive Qualitative Study

My thesis structure was designed to explore the research questions through an empirical mixed-method design, where qualitative and quantitative analyses would complement each other.

Original Thesis Structure:

Study One: Systematic Review

Study Two: Quantitative Intersectional Study

Study Three: Empirical Descriptive Qualitative Study

The aim of study one, an empirical systematic review, was to build a collective understanding of the literature relating to higher education and occupation aspirations and attainment for youth in rural areas. The study was designed to provide analytical depth, contextualised detail, and detailed processes of construction of aspirations and attainment for higher education and occupations. Building on these findings the second study, a quantitative intersectional study, would enable me to then examine the research questions on a macro level. The quantitative intersectional study was designed to provide valuable generalised information from a large population about the average case. The aim of the study was to describe the quantity and type of social capital in relation to higher education aspirations for youth in rural and urban locations, within and between the groups (rural and urban).

Finally, I then intended to shift back to a descriptive qualitative study to provide a more nuanced understanding of how geographical, socio-cultural, and economic factors may influence higher education and occupation aspiration and attainment for youth from different backgrounds and in different rural areas. This study was designed to enable me to look at the areas identified from the quantitative longitudinal study that may require further investigation. I hoped that the mix of quantitative and qualitative data would provide both broader patterns of higher education aspirations and attainment for youth in rural areas, as well as more detailed understandings of the mechanisms, rationales, capacities, and influences behind these choices (Wodtke, Harding & Elwert, 2011). I had commenced my originally planned study three months prior to and early in the COVID-19 Pandemic before making the decision to re-design due to its impacts. In the next section, I describe the work completed, followed by an overview of the pandemic's impacts in relation to my research, the reasons for my decision to redesign, and finally, I outline the re-designed study three.

Study Three Descriptive Qualitative Study: Work Completed

The work completed for the descriptive qualitative study prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic included developing a theoretical approach, research design, and methodology, as

well as the development of interview scripts and scoping of rural areas. Additionally, I had considered the benefits and potential risks of the intended research, and ethics approval had been gained by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee, the Catholic Education Office, NSW, and the Department of Education, NSW.

The study intended to examine how living in diverse rural communities (different geographies, histories, cultures, and economics) differentially shapes higher education and occupation aspirations for youth at the school, family, and community levels. The main aims of the study were to: (1) further understand the influence of diverse rural environments on educational and occupational aspirations for youth in rural areas; (2) allow comparisons of experiences from different rural areas; (3) further inform the quantitative data findings with the experiences of, and the insights gained from the students, parents, and teachers being interviewed; and (4) inform the mechanisms and nuances underlying the quantitative results. The project was designed to explore the intersection of rural origin, gender, and socioeconomic status, with a focus on understanding how different rural communities shape youths' aspirations. This was to be undertaken through an in-depth interpreted understanding of the social world of the research participant: Year 10 students, parents, and teachers. This understanding would be gained by learning about the sense participants make of their social and geographical circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories, through a reflexive qualitative research approach (Pope, Bond, Morrison-Saunders & Retief, 2013). The findings from both the descriptive qualitative study and quantitative longitudinal study were to be considered together to deepen understandings.

Theoretical approach

I intended to draw on feminist and post structural perspectives and theories, as well as cultural geography (Reay, 2002; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001, Dillabough, Kennelly and Wang, 2008). Consideration was also to be given to the influence of neo-liberalism on dominant discourses and representations of youth in rural areas in my analysis of participant

data. Additionally, understanding how discursive practices shape educational aspirations and are shaped by rural youth through the discourses they take on would be important in my study (Cairns, 2013; Foucault, 2000). I also intended to draw on cultural geography and affect studies which recognises that a person experiences life subjectively, as embodied, and embedded in specific social structures and histories (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001).

Research Design and Methodology

The research design was qualitative and based on a social constructivism perspective. A descriptive and interpretive approach to the phenomena of interest was to be taken, which would produce rich data from a small number of participants (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Effective qualitative research uses methodology compatible with the context of the research. As participation in education is a focus, where possible participatory methodology would be used. This approach was designed to allow me to challenge and reconsider widely accepted fundamental explanations and interpretations of familiar situations and strategies (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Participatory research methods involve individuals whose lives, worlds, and significant actions are being studied in both the planning and conducting of the research. This approach ensures that research aims, and questions emerge from the integration of both scientific and practical perspectives, ideally leading to mutual benefit (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). In this context, I had hoped that participatory research would enable students' voices to be heard and their life experiences to form part of the discussion, as well as providing individual perspectives on their lived experiences in rural communities and their aspirations for higher education. Furthermore, the research was intended to be in-depth and exploratory, as I could not be sure what individual participants would reveal. A reflexive approach was to be taken to understand that all participants, including the researcher, bring with them ideas, understandings, values, experiences, and different identities, which play a part in research interaction (Hammersley, 2013). All participants in the interview, researcher, high school

student, parent, or teacher, would be involved in learning and constructing knowledge. This study was to also draw on inductive strategies and recognise that it is the local knowledge and practices that are being studied (Flick, 1998).

The research was going to involve Year 10 high school students, Year 10 teachers, and parents of Year 10 students, participating in individual semi-structured interviews in three differently geographically distinct regional and rural areas. The study was to include at least twenty participants, all of whom would be current Year 10 high school students living in regional and rural communities, a small sample of parents (8 – 10), and at least one teacher from each school. They would represent the perspectives of high school students, parents, and teachers from regional and rural backgrounds.

I intended to conduct the semi-structured interviews in participants' homes (with proper ethics protocols in place), as it is preferable that the interviews be situated and contextual. "Situated" interviews provide privacy to the participant that the public place of school may not, as other students may see the student participating in the research if the interview is conducted in school. Furthermore, in a "situated" interview, the researcher gives up some form of control in the research process, as they are in a simultaneous role as both guest and investigator. This helps balance the power dynamics, making them more conducive to effective research (Berg & Lune, 2017).

Moreover, semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allow for flexibility and the opportunity to explore issues that may unexpectedly arise (Berg & Lune, 2017).

The interviewer can change the wording of questions, the order they are asked in, and incorporate extra questions (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2006). This instinctive formulation of questions helps to create a conversational style, facilitates the exploration of topics as they arise, and fosters openness (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2006). The resulting text and language is a central feature of socially constructed knowledge (Willig, 2008). A thematic analysis would then have been undertaken to further explore these elements.

The proposed methodological approach for this study was driven by the aim to gain insights specific to distinct rural locations and students' context. The interview guides were designed to explore the influences in youths' social networks that shape their educational and occupational aspirations, as well as exploring what factors influence youth to develop their social relationships and networks (Hardie, 2009). Ideas relating to four categories were to be explored: geographical location, education engagement, home / community involvement, and plans for after school. The four categories were designed to explore various interrelated factors that may influence the decision-making process of youth in relation to their aspirations for higher education. Data linking (students, parents, and teachers) would have been undertaken to achieve these understandings. A series of questions had been formulated and grouped into the four categories to form the interview schedules.

Main research question

How does living in diverse rural communities (different geographies, histories, cultures, and economics) differentially shape higher education aspirations for youth from different backgrounds?

Parallel question

How do rural contexts shape youths' educational aspirations at the family, school, and community levels?

Four categories of questions

Geographical location

The questions in this category were designed to gain insights into how a student perceives their surroundings and rurality, as well as to gain understandings of how students, parents, and teachers view and interact with the physical geography of the area, including the impact of meteorological events.

Home/Community Involvement

Mechanisms such as social ties to family, the land, and community may influence students living in rural areas to choose not to pursue higher education (Elder et al., 1996). Strong community links in small towns have been shown to be both a strength and a weakness of rural and provincial life. This is because young people tend to perceive considerable emotional and financial costs in moving away from home to access to higher education opportunities, and they may also feel that higher education is not for them if this is outside family/community norms and expectations (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Elder and Conger found that farming families with stronger social capital, greater integration into the community, and more family involvement create a context in which youth develop non-cognitive skills, such as, self-regulation and confidence (2000). Further, it was argued that these skills are needed not only to succeed in life, but also provide academic advantages (Elder et al., 1996). Additionally, youth who have fewer social ties to family and less engagement with community may want to leave but experience constraints in achieving this (Petrin et al. 2014). Questions in this category are designed to gain insights from students and their parents about their involvement in their local community and families. The data gained from these questions would have been used to explore the differential effects of community and family engagement on students' aspirations for higher education. The questions in this category for teachers are designed to provide understandings of the teachers' perception of the area and its related employment and higher education options for young people.

Plans for after school

These questions were designed to gain insights into any perceived economic, logistic, and emotional costs of attending university. They will also provide information about familiarity with adults/peers who are role models in professions that require a university level education within the local community. The questions in this category for parents aim to gain insights about access to and the importance of higher education information. The questions are also designed to gain further insights into the specific context of the town. Additionally,

the questions will enable insights into the perceptions of the opportunities or barriers to higher education that may exist and the town's culture.

Education engagement

These questions are designed to complement and draw on the insights gained by the responses to the questions in the other three categories: geographical location, home/community involvement, and plans for after school. They aim to develop my understandings of students' educational motivation, choice of engagement level with school activities, and their choice of study areas in relation to higher education aspirations. The questions for parents are designed to inform the study about family educational backgrounds and how education is valued and perceived, as family influences can impact a youth's aspirations for higher education. The questions for teachers are designed to gain insights and understandings into the school community and the various choices students make in terms of school involvement and subject choice.

The intention was to allow for "rich descriptions," and to capture "the insider's point of view," as well as an understanding of "the constraints of everyday life" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In summary, I believed a qualitative and exploratory approach was necessary for this study to enable depth, detail, and a culturally contextualised understanding of youth aspirations.

Importantly, I am far from alone in having my plans disrupted by COVID-19. The pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities in Australia, particularly affecting people (O'Shea, Koshy & Drane, 2021). It disrupted transitions, influenced young peoples' plans, and affected their access to resources and infrastructure needed to implement their plans (O'Shea et al. 2021). Given a focus of my research is on rural transitions from high-school, it seems critical that I not only discuss how COVID-19 influenced my own journey through university as a Higher Degree Student but also how it impacted those who are the focus of my research, young people living in rural Australia.

COVID 19 Pandemic Impacts

COVID-19 was originally detected in New South Wales, Australia, in January 2020. By March 2020, as the World Health Organisation declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic, Australia had closed its borders, and the federal government had announced several measures to be implemented by state governments. During this time, the NSW government had restricted travel, including to regional NSW, stipulating that people could only travel for essential purposes. Additionally, parents were encouraged to keep children at home, and non-essential activities and businesses were shut down. During this lockdown period schools pivoted to teaching online for most of their students. After 56 days of online learning, in late May 2020, schools returned to face-to-face teaching, however many restrictions remained, including no external staff or providers in schools. After 73 days of lockdown, in June 2020, travel to regional NSW was allowed again.

In June 2021, lockdown measures were reinstated in the Greater Sydney area. From August 2021, residents were restricted to travelling only 5km from their homes, and travel to and between regional NSW was banned. During this period, schools in NSW once again pivoted to online teaching for most of their students. At the same time, a vaccination program was implemented across the states, which encouraged residents to get vaccinated. However, in the initial stages, there were long waiting times to access vaccinations. In October 2021, after 107 days when the vaccination rate was over 70%, Greater Sydney was released from the lockdown and regional travel was allowed. However, ongoing physical and mental health, education, and financial impacts continued for NSW residents. In particular health and education inequalities were worsened and exposed in rural NSW communities.

Young people have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with youth and young adults particularly affected because of lost opportunities for education, employment, and socialisation opportunities (McNeely, Schintler & Stabile, 2020; Timonen,

Greene & Émon, 2021). Recent research indicates that the pandemic has increased the gap in the learning differences between students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It is predicted that for students from disadvantaged backgrounds there will be greater education losses, which will likely have long-term effects on their employment opportunities and overall wellbeing (Schleicher, 2020). As such, the Organisation for Economic Impact and Community Development is concerned that the progress made to date to reduce educational disadvantage will be lost and are emphasising the importance of suitable policies to prevent this happening (Schleicher, 2020; Atherton, 2020).

COVID-19 Impacts on Educational Inequalities in Rural Areas

The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased educational inequity for youth living in rural Australia, which is likely to further negatively impact on their transitions into higher education as well as their higher educational and occupational outcomes (O'Shea, Koshy, Drane, 2021; Cook, Burke, Bunn & Cuervo, 2022). The pandemic is now understood to be a social and educational crisis, as well as a health one (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; Sonnermann & Goss, 2020).

Educational transitions for youth have been shown to be influenced by monumental events, such as the Great Depression (Elder, 1998). Elder's Children of the Great Depression study, a longitudinal study of children who grew up in the 1930's in America, found that people's development and outcomes are shaped by the social paths they follow, their interaction with places, and the time period they live in (Conger & Elder, 1994). The life course framework and theory outlines how differences in place interrelate with differences in historical times, and so the life course of a person is shaped according to the conditions of society (Elder, 1998; Conger & Elder, 1994). Life course theory also recognises that people have agency and can make choices about their lives within the constraints of their environment, and that how a person understands their situation, together with their lived

experiences, will influence the choices they make (Conger & Elder, 1994). Drawing on Elder's life course theory (1998) we can understand that macro level historical changes, such as a global pandemic, can change youths' experiences of growing up at the individual level.

Prior to the pandemic, geographic distance has been a major factor in educational inequity in Australia (Halsey, 2018). Youth living in rural Australia have consistently lower higher educational outcomes compared to youth living in urban Australia (Halsey, 2018). Currently, in urban Australia more than 48 per cent of 25–34-year-olds have an undergraduate degree, compared to just over 20 per cent of 25 – 34-year-olds in regional Australia, and 16 per cent in remote Australia. Further less than 10 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth have an undergraduate degree (Minister for Education, Jason Clare).

However, the pandemic introduced additional factors that have the potential to impact further on higher educational and occupational outcomes for youth in rural Australia. With secondary schooling disrupted and online learning in place for significant periods during 2020 and 2021, structural inequalities were exposed, and inequities deepened (Fuqua & Roberts, 2021). These conditions are likely to affect not only youths' experience of education and their future educational and occupational choices but also their school outcomes, which in turn impact their access to higher education.

The rapid shift to online teaching highlighted the digital divide experienced by schools and their students. Access to learning became reliant, not only on students, families, and schools' capacity to access the internet with a fast, stable connection, but also their financial resources for devices and data costs. Educational inequalities in Australia have been worsened by online learning, particularly for children who lack access to devices and/or the internet, or those who have to share a device with multiple siblings. As a result, these children have fallen behind their peers (PISA, 2016; Educational Opportunity in Australia, 2020). This issue has impacted heavily on youth in rural areas, due to the disparity in provision of stable internet in locations outside of metropolitan Australia. Many rural areas continue to have unreliable and

poor quality of internet connections (Fuqua & Roberts, 2021; Halsey, 2018). The Australian Digital Inclusion Index Report (2020) shows an ongoing and considerable gap in the ability to access digital infrastructure between city and rural locations (Thomas, Barraket, Parkinson, Wilson, Holcombe-James, Kennedy, Mannell, Brydon, 2021).

As a result, educators and Principals across Australia reported concerns for the academic progress of students and the emerging significant socioeconomic disparities in learning. Public schools in lower socioeconomic areas, including many rural areas, have reported insufficient access to technology, including both hardware and internet access. A recent report from the Queensland Auditor General found that 14 per cent of students in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic areas, which include rural areas, did not have access to devices during the 2020 lockdown. Additionally, 28 per cent of students in these areas received paper-based resources during that time (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff, Earle, & Margetts, 2022). It is likely that this will impact on educational outcomes and transitions to higher education and occupations.

Teachers also reported increased stress, anxiety, feelings of overwhelm, and substantial fears over their ability to manage the increase in workload and need to learn new technology (Flack et al. 2022). In one report principals estimated that students overall during the pandemic learned 51 % - 90% of the curriculum, however students from high socioeconomic backgrounds reported learning 90% to 100% of the school curriculum at twice the rate of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Flack et al. 2022). This impacts heavily on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in public schools in rural areas. Research has noted that many students reported feeling stressed and anxious, struggling with the workload, the mode of delivery, and the loss of interaction during the pandemic. However, these impacts were felt more deeply for some students living in rural areas who faced additional challenges, such as competition for household resources, a lack of internet connection, and no access to a quiet place to study (Flack et al. 2022). This highlights

differential experiences and impacts for students from different social backgrounds within the rural communities.

Additionally, the pandemic's lockdowns and closure of internal borders impacted on youth in rural Australia being able to relocate for or continue their higher education (Cook et al. 2022). Although all youth were affected, youth from different backgrounds with different access to resources and experiences had different responses and outcomes in being able to relocate for or continue their higher education (Cook et al. 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had and is continuing to have many impacts on schooling and higher education for both teachers and students. Key themes emerging include: increased stress and anxiety, increased social disconnect, loss of personal freedoms, loss of social and personal identity, degradation of support networks, changing family circumstances, and concerns over preparedness for work or further education (King, 2022). Loss of social and personal identity is associated with isolation, lockdowns, and the deprivation of face-to-face contact, but also with the involuntary loss of key "coming-of-age" experiences. Many youths during the pandemic were not able to experience school formals and part-time work. These experiences play a role in personal growth and can help to prepare youth for work or higher education (King, 2022). All these impacts demonstrate how a macro level historical event, such as the pandemic, can change youth's experiences of growing up at the individual level and shape their aspirations, including higher education aspirations (Elder, 1998).

One of the potential positives to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic is the rapid increase of online learning offerings in higher education. Historically, youth from rural areas have been forced to leave their rural communities if they wanted to go on to higher education, as most universities are in urban locations in Australia (Bradley, 2008; Halsey, 2018). Online study has the potential to increase access to higher education for youth in rural areas, however these opportunities can be difficult to take advantage of if there is a lack of access to fast

reliable internet connections and digital technologies in rural areas, as well as economic resources (Fuqua & Roberts, 2021; Cook, Burke, Bunn & Cuervo, 2021).

All the impacts discussed here are likely to influence post-school aspirations and transitions for youth living in rural Australia. The pandemic's impacts including limited personal growth experiences and increased anxiety, as well as the flow on effects of potentially lower year 12 outcomes due to inaccessibility of learning for some youth in rural areas, could create further barriers to access, and participation to higher education. Additionally, this could then create further misrecognition of capability for youth in rural areas which they internalise to believe they are "not bright enough" and lead to further constraints on identity formation of someone that goes on to higher education, thereby impacting on a choice to aspire to higher education (Webb, Burke, Nichols, Roberts, Stahl, Threadgold, & Wilkinson, 2017).

Importantly, although the pandemic will have impacted on all youth living in rural areas, youth will have had different experiences in relation to where they live (rural location) and social background (SES, gender, Indigenous status, Migrant status). Youth's experiences are likely to differ significantly depending on the social location of the student in society and in particular in relation to their economic status therefore influencing transitions into higher education and occupations differently (Cook, et al. 2022).

The pandemic has been a monumental event, which has further highlighted and exacerbated some of the structural inequities experienced by youth in general in rural Australia compared to youth in urban areas.

COVID-19 Impacts on Rural vs Urban Dichotomies and Migration

In addition to the social and educational impacts of COVID-19 in rural areas, attention was drawn to urban-rural dichotomies and migration patterns (Malatzky, Gillespie, Couch & Cosgrave, 2020). The pandemic emphasised these ongoing dichotomies, with a notable shift: urban areas, previously perceived as sophisticated, became seen as places of threat, while

rural areas, once viewed as inferior, were considered positively as safe places (Malatzky et al. 2020). As the reality of the pandemic hit Australia, urban residents began to see rural areas as safe. However, this perspective contrasted with that of local residents who were most concerned about access to healthcare (Malatzky et al. 2020). These shifts in perceptions could be seen to impact movement and migration during the pandemic.

Migration from Australia's state capital cities to regional areas in 2020 and 2021 was higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Regional Movers Index, 2022). In fact, the rate of movement to regional areas was more than double the levels recorded over the two years prior to the start of the pandemic. Sydney and Melbourne had net outflows in 2021 of 53% and 46% of the total. Data confirmed that the pandemic was affecting people's decisions about where to live and confirms that there was a positive shift towards living in rural areas in 2020 and 2021.

However, importantly, the increase in the population of rural areas was primarily due to more people choosing to remain living in rural areas, rather than a big increase of people choosing to leave urban areas (Regional Movers Index, 2022). In 2020, approximately 193,000 people moved from rural to urban areas, which represents a decrease of 25,500 from 2019. Notably, the largest decline in migration from rural to urban areas was for young people aged 15–24-years. Many youths and young people delayed or changed their plans to move to urban areas for further education or career opportunities (Regional Movers Index, 2022). Future research could explore how this change in migration pattern impacted on youth in rural areas aspirations for higher education.

Additionally, rural-urban dichotomies, that is the value of a rural or urban identity, adds complexity in the identity development process of youth in rural areas (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; San Antonio, 2016). The studies reviewed in my systematic review found that an urban identity is often more valued than a rural identity in terms of higher education, leading some youth in rural communities to feel that they have fewer identity choices due to limited

access to higher education (Webb et al., 2015; Fataar, 2010; Bachechi, 2015; San Antonio, 2016).

Moreover, these youths were also found to often face choices about whether to stay or leave their rural communities as they constructed their identities as young adults (Elder et al. 1996; Elsveld & Else, 2004; Beasley, 2016; San Antonio, 2016). The school and community context were also found to play a role in shaping potential identities for these youth, such as a “work bound identity” or a “college going’ identity” (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012; Bachechi, 2015; Fataar, 2010).

Moreover, the need to understand how discursive practices shape educational aspirations and are shaped by youth in rural areas through the discourses they take on, was a finding from my systematic review. The influence of neoliberal educational discourses around educational meritocracy, individualisation, choice, migration, and legitimate categories of being (rural deficit and urban privileging) were readily identifiable across the systematic review analysis. I suggested that further research is needed in this area to consider how rural deficit discourses and urban privileging may impact on higher education aspirations and attainment. Further it would be interesting to explore the extent of any shift in rural-urban dichotomies and migration patterns that occurred during the pandemic to understand if this shift impacted on discursive practices shaping rural identity development.

COVID-19 Impacts on Research

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented research worldwide on the virus impacts including some emerging research on the pandemic’s impacts on youth in rural areas. Most critically, the pandemic drew our attention to structural constraints experienced by youth in rural areas, such as limited access to the internet, digital devices, educational resources, and higher education institutions. In other words, how some youth, are unequally positioned in society to be able to respond to unexpected events, such as the pandemic. This

awareness highlights how the structure of rural can impact on youths' choice to aspire and access higher education, compared to their urban counterparts.

Moreover, whilst adaptability and resilience became tools of survival during the pandemic, the ability to adapt and resolve are limited by the resources a family and school has at their disposal (King, 2022). For youth living in rural areas who have limited access to the internet, digital devices and educational resources in general, no amount of resolve can overcome the structural barrier to education which impacts on their educational outcomes. My descriptive qualitative study was designed to contribute to further contextualised findings across distinct geographic locations. However, there were several constraints preventing data collection throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Data Collection and Reasons for Redesigning

During the pandemic, a lot of academic research was restricted or redirected to research COVID-19. After careful consideration I chose not to persist with the data collection for the descriptive qualitative study and instead redesign my study to draw on data that already existed. In the next section I will briefly outline the constraints on data collection due to COVID-19 pandemic and the reasons for my decision to undertake a quantitative social capital mediation study in place of the descriptive qualitative study.

The original planned for structure of my thesis, as described in the first section of this chapter, included a third descriptive qualitative research study. However, the combination of lockdowns and restrictions of travel to rural areas throughout 2020 and 2021 prevented my data collection to proceed as planned. Initially, I applied for an ethics extension which was granted, however, after careful consideration as the pandemic crisis deepened and lengthened, I made the decision to re-design the third study. The reasons for this decision were multi-faceted.

One of the reasons was the ongoing duration of the pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021 in which the NSW government imposed stay at home orders, and as COVID-19 spread

in 2021 an extended lock down was imposed for the Greater Sydney area where I live. This prevented any travel to rural areas to collect data on and off for many months. During this time, ACU Research took the difficult decision to suspend all face-to-face contact with research participants and schools were also closed to external staff and visitors for periods of time as teaching pivoted to online.

In my decision making, I also took into consideration the effects of the lockdowns on schools, teachers, and students wellbeing, and was mindful of not wanting to add to the overwhelm and stress being experienced by teachers and students. Additionally, I took into consideration the lack of health services in rural areas and the potentially devastating effects for a rural area if it were to experience an outbreak of COVID-19 brought in from Sydney.

An alternative to face-to-face interviews would have been to undertake telephone or video options, however this method would not have been appropriate for my intended highly qualitative and exploratory research design. Integral to the study was conducting the interviews face to face and in the participants homes for reasons that I outlined in the overview of the descriptive qualitative study. Additionally, due to the digital divide that was being experienced in rural areas, it would have been highly likely that problems such as participants not having the required technology or being able to use the technology, as well as the issue of access to reliable internet would have occurred.

However most importantly, the health and wellbeing of participants comes first so, although it could have been possible to change my interviews from in person to online interviews, I needed to consider whether asking youth, their parents, and teachers to participate in research during the pandemic would have caused additional unnecessary stress and be inappropriate in the current context, which I believed it would have been. Additionally as a global pandemic affects people's mental health and decision-making, interviewing during this time would likely have implications for the validity of the data collected and necessitate additional complex ethical issues to consider. Consequently, I decided that it would not be

possible to carry out the research meaningfully and responsibly, so for these reasons I chose to redesign the third study. In the next section I outline the redesign reasons to undertake an intersectional quantitative social capital study in place of the original study.

Re-designed Study Three: Quantitative Social Capital Mediation Study

Redesigned Thesis Structure:

Study One: Systematic Review

Study Two: Quantitative Intersectional Social Capital Study

Study Three: Quantitative Social Capital Mediation Study

The redesigned study builds on study two to quantitatively explore the differences in higher education aspirations between youth in rural and urban Australia, and the mediation association of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations for these youth. Study two, a quantitative intersectional theory study, explored the relationship between geography and social capital, specifically quantifying social capital differences, amount and type, between youth in rural Australia and their urban counterparts.

Study Two: Quantitative Intersectional Social Capital Study

Research Questions:

- Q1. Do youth living in rural and urban locations differ in the amount of social capital?
- Q1b. Do youth living in rural and urban locations differ in the amount of social capital when controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, country of birth and Indigenous status?
- Q2. Does social background (socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, geographic location, country of birth and gender) interact with place to affect the amount of social capital youth living in rural areas obtain?

My systematic review found that most studies tended to treat youth in rural areas as a homogenous group, as is similar in the emerging research, highlighting the need for research to understand the differential access and effects of social capital on youths' aspirations and attainment of higher education, intersected with social group attributes and individual characteristics. My theoretical framework, informed by a critical realism epistemology, which serves as a guide on which I have built my research, includes intersectionality.

The redesigned study three, quantitative social capital mediation study, not only enables a deeper dive on the social capital findings from study two to explore differential higher education aspirations and the mediation association of social capital, but as it is drawing on already existing data (LSAY 2003), I could continue to progress the research throughout the pandemic.

Study three research questions include:

1. Is there a difference in higher education aspirations between youth in rural and urban areas?
2. Does social background (socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, country of birth and gender) interact with geography to affect the amount of higher education aspirations youth living in rural areas obtain?
3. Does social capital act as a mediator for differences in higher education aspirations between youth in rural and urban areas?

This study provides further understanding of the role and importance of social capital in mediating disadvantage for youth in rural Australia in relation to higher education aspirations. In recent years, there has been considerable research exploring social capital as an explanatory factor in post-school outcomes as was evidenced in my systematic review, however during the COVID-19 pandemic, other factors including structural issues have been made visible.

The findings from this study, building on the systematic review findings and the findings from the first quantitative study (study two), could assist in understanding the role and importance of social capital in the relationship between geography and higher education aspirations. Thus, assisting to determine how much of a focus on social capital strategies is helpful in interventions designed to increase higher education aspirations for youth in rural Australia, and guiding where to focus policy and research attention in the future.