
FINDINGS FROM A PILOT STUDY INTO STUDENT RETENTION BEYOND YEAR 10

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Abstract

This paper reports on early findings from a pilot study into student retention beyond Year 10. Located in rural, regional and disadvantaged communities in Tasmania, the research has implications at State, national and international levels. It is being funded by a nationally competitive Australian Research Council Linkage grant and the Tasmanian Department of Education across three years. The paper begins by providing a conceptual overview of the research, including the background to the study, and then reports on trends that have emerged during the initial phase of data collection. Preliminary findings resulting from pilot data analysis of responses to questionnaires by students in Years 5 and 9/10 are discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion about what these early findings suggest in regard to factors impacting on student retention.

Introduction

Increased retention of students beyond the compulsory years of schooling is fundamental to improving the skills and capacity of our youth, to lifting the nation's educational ranking among OECD countries and, ultimately, to raising productivity and the health and well-being of its people (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). Although retention of young people in education is clearly a matter of both national and international significance, it is now an issue of critical economic and social importance in Tasmania, particularly given that the State has some of the lowest retention rates when compared with other Australian States and Territories.

This paper reports some tentative findings from the early phase of a State-wide Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project examining student retention beyond Year 10 in Tasmania. The project, which is being conducted in partnership with the Tasmanian Department of Education, is a longitudinal study over three years (2012-2014). The scope of the project is summarised below.

The paper draws on the findings from a pilot study using one of the main data collection instruments, viz. a student survey, to be employed later in 2012 across Tasmanian schools. The aims of the pilot study were twofold. It was designed to examine the reliability, validity and utility of the survey, as well as to provide some relevant tentative findings of value in themselves as important data signposts for attention later in the study. Details about the review of the pilot instrumentation itself, including Factor Analysis, are provided elsewhere (Author (in press)). Final instrumentation for the study will include this survey, adapted for administration to students from Years 5 to 11, teacher, parent and community member surveys and interview and focus group schedules.

Overview of the three-year project

An overview of the scope of the three-year project is provided here in order to locate the findings of this paper in the broader agenda of the research. In brief, the project is designed to investigate best educational practice to enhance retention in schooling in rural, regional and disadvantaged communities in Tasmania via the following means:

- a) investigating factors that influence students' decisions to continue their schooling beyond Year 10;
- b) examining organisational issues, such as leadership and organisational culture, which contribute to an ethos and commitment among staff to pursuing student retention beyond current levels;
- c) identifying and documenting:
 - o key interventions at primary, secondary and post-Year 10 school levels that enhance student retention;
 - o school, community and home practices that enhance student retention;
 - o specific practices related to the use of new technologies to enhance student retention;and
- d) providing recommendations to relevant stakeholders for developing, implementing, and monitoring interventions across local (Tasmanian) and national contexts.

The student survey, about which this paper reports pilot, preliminary findings, will contribute key data with regard to the first of these means of investigation, namely, investigating factors that influence students' decisions to stay on at school beyond the compulsory years.

Background: Understanding the Tasmanian research context for the study

Tasmania has the most rurally dispersed population of all the Australian States, making difficult equality of provision of, and access to, education (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2010). Tasmania is also the most socio-economically disadvantaged of all the States as measured by a number of socio-economic indices, including disposable household income and adult and youth unemployment rates. Over one-third of the population lives on government public financial assistance (ABS, 2007). These factors work together to depress educational retention rates beyond Year 10, with consequent impacts upon the social and economic prosperity of the State. Although 86% of the jobs in Australia require a post-school qualification, in 2007 only 47% of Tasmania's workforce had that level of qualification (Government of Tasmania, 2007). The Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2007) found that in terms of vocational transition the most disadvantaged groups comprise individuals who: live in a rural or remote location; live in low socio-economic communities; drop out of school or are early secondary school leavers; and/or have some form of disability.

In 2008, Tasmania's post-Year 10 retention rates were low, with only 55% of students staying on until Year 12, compared with the Australian average of 62% (ABS, 2008). In comparison to other States, Tasmanian young people have a higher than average probability of belonging to a group called the "NEET" (not in education, employment, or training), a group who are disengaged from learning, in part because of low aspirations and poor transitional pathways (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001). The cost to young people of early disengagement from education is profound and potentially lifelong, and can affect their relationships with family, friends and community as well as their own self perceptions, confidence, and mental health (Steверink, Westerhof, Bode & Dittmann-Kohli, 2001). The subsequent costs to the community as a whole through lost productivity, ongoing skills shortages, and demands on the health, justice and welfare systems are potentially significant. Research has shown that a holistic approach to the problem of low post-compulsory participation is required to address challenges involved at the family, community and institutional level (Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

Overview of issues in retention

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

In the Tasmanian context, separate post-Year 10 institutions require many adolescents to leave their rural homes in order to attend classes and/or board in larger regional towns. These factors have been demonstrated to impact negatively on the aspirations and plans of rural and regional students and their parents (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). Although the separation of Years 11 and 12 from lower secondary grades is not the norm elsewhere in Australia, other factors such as geographic isolation, which is a relevant but less acute factor in Tasmania, create a similar need for young people to move away from their homes, thereby creating an additional barrier to continuing their education. Strategies that improve linkages between primary schools and secondary schools (Years 7-10) and senior colleges (Years 11-12) have been suggested as a means of ameliorating this situation.

The attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of secondary school teachers have been shown to help shape the post-school pathways chosen by school leavers (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001). Some teachers have low expectations of their students' capacities to learn (Beswick, 2005, 2007) and these attitudes and beliefs can emerge among groups of teachers working together (Beswick, Watson & DeGeest, 2010). Although it has been established that beliefs are highly contextual (Beswick, 2003), Beswick's research recognises that in Tasmania, although primary, secondary, and post-Year 10 teachers work on different campuses, they should be collaborating much more closely regarding student retention. Notably, the impact of teachers' beliefs on student retention and how these beliefs may be enhanced to improve retention of students beyond the compulsory years of schooling has been under-researched.

Clearly, there are multiple factors at play in decisions students make about staying on at school and continuing their education. The key ones as identified here provided the framework for the development of the student survey employed in the pilot study.

The pilot study

This section briefly discusses the scope of the study and provides an overview of the survey instrument.

Trial schools

Two schools were invited to participate in the pilot study, one primary in which Year 5 students were targeted, and one secondary with Years 9/10 as the target. Both schools were located in Hobart, which was chosen mainly for the ease of access by the research team in terms of proximity and researcher links with the schools. Forty-four Year 5 students and 50 Year 9/10 students completed the survey either online or in hard copy, depending on student access to in-class computers.

Teachers at the schools assisted with the administrative arrangements for the survey, although the actual administrations were conducted by members of the research team. This was done both to trial the administration process and also to provide feedback on how best to administer the survey later

across multiple schools in the State. A brief overview of the project, purposes of the study and consideration of ethical issues/consent were discussed with students by the researchers before actual administration of the survey.

The survey instrument

The development of the survey for the pilot study – appropriate versions of which will be administered to students across the State in Years 5, 7, 9, 10 and 11 – drew on key concepts from the literature discussed above. In particular, the survey was structured around the 12 dimensions included in Table 1. Sample items from the survey are provided to illustrate each dimension.

Table 1
Conceptual Dimensions of the Student Survey

| Dimension | Sample item |
|---|---|
| 1. Engagement with schooling | My education is important to me. |
| 2. Connection with school curriculum | I understand the schoolwork I do. |
| 3. Connection with further and higher education | I plan to go to university. |
| 4. Relationship with teachers | My teachers are interested in me. |
| 5. Teacher aspirations | My teachers have high expectations of me. |
| 6. Career aspirations | I know what sort of job I want to have when I leave school. |
| 7. Parental aspirations | My parents/guardians want me to stay at school after Year 10. |
| 8. Academic self-concept | I get high grades on my school work. |
| 9. School culture | I am encouraged to be involved in sports, clubs and other activities. |
| 10. School organisation/administration | The school timetable works well for me. |
| 11. Physical environment | This is a good school. |
| 12. Additional items | Travel, cost of education, friends' educational plans |

Sets of items were generated by the research team for each of the dimensions. Items were then critically reviewed and revised, both by the research team members and also via some small-scale informal trials with students. The final version of the survey used in this pilot comprised:

- An information sheet, consent form and instructions on how to complete the survey;
- 11 biographical items;
- 22 items requiring five option Likert type response – *not at all important, somewhat important, not sure, important, very important*; and
- 42 items requiring five option Likert type response – *strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, strongly agree*.

It was expected that the instrument would take about 20 minutes to complete. This proved to be the case generally, with some students finishing in less time.

Findings and discussion

For the purposes of this discussion, we report on descriptive statistics (e.g., percentage responses in graphical forms) that were generated for each of the items. These data were critically reviewed by the research team in light of the relevant literature and the 12 dimensions noted above. As a result, three tentative themes were identified from the trial data. The first theme concerned issues associated with *teachers* and the views they conveyed to students about staying on at school and continuing their education. Included here were aspects such as students' perceptions of teachers' views about students and their learning, and matters associated with continuation of schooling in future years, beyond Year 10, and beyond Year 12. The second theme was associated with *parents*, and canvassed similar aspects as those noted for teachers. The third theme was associated with *students* themselves, and concerned

their perceptions of their capacities as students and their views and aspirations about engaging in future schooling and educational pathways.

Before examining each of these three themes, it is instructive to frame such discussion by examining what students saw as major structural influences on decisions to continue education beyond Year 10. In some ways, these influences emerge as a fourth or associated theme. The term “structural” is used because these influences constitute potential physical barriers (or facilitators) to staying in education, as opposed to attitudinal matters that are considered under the three themes. In considering these structural influences, it is important to note again that post-Year 10 government-funded educational institutions in Tasmania, namely senior secondary colleges, are separate from Years 7-10 secondary schools. Considered among the structural influences were matters such as:

- the need to live away from home and find accommodation, possibly with a relative or friend;
- the need to change schools; and
- the cost of staying in education.

In general, in response to questions about such matters, students across both Years 5 and 9/10 showed considerable diversity in their views. Thus, it would appear that, although some students saw structural issues as “important” and others as “not important,” the large number of “not sure” responses suggests that a good number of students have not begun to think about such matters impacting on them as yet. This is probably not surprising for the Year 5 respondents, but is somewhat surprising for the Year 9/10 students for whom decisions about such influences might only be a matter of several months away. Noteworthy also is that almost all students indicated that having a wide range of subjects to choose from was an important factor in decisions about continuing education after Year 10.

Theme 1: Teachers and education

Students at both Year 5 and Year 9/10 levels generally reported being positive about school and their teachers. In particular, the vast majority at both year levels were very positive about their teachers, indicating that they, as students, had good teachers who: listened to them; treated them with respect; helped them to learn; and supported them. Figure 1 includes student responses to two sample survey items about teachers.

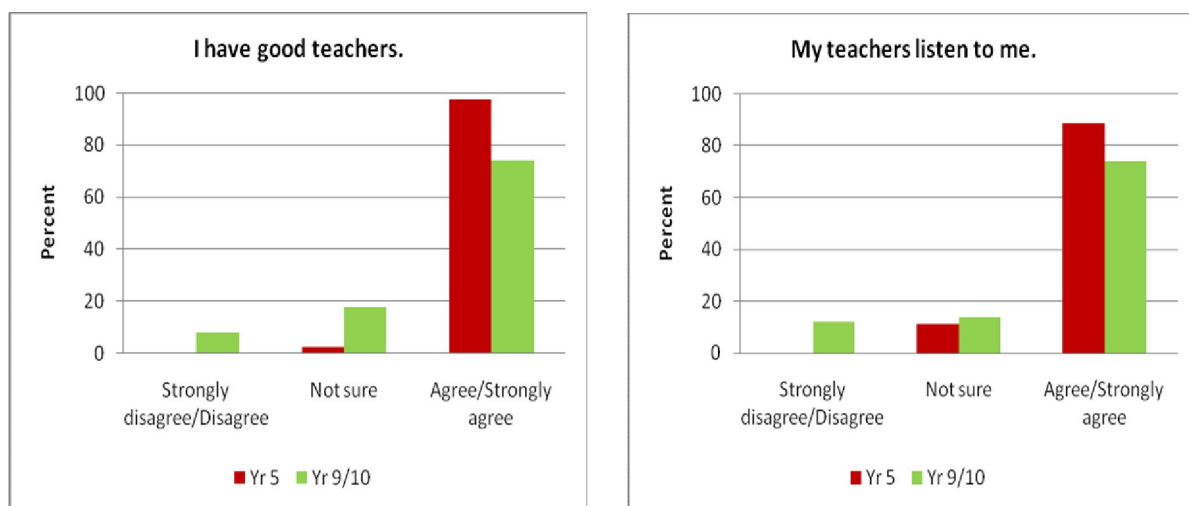


Figure 1. Stated level of agreement to sample statements about teachers

Although still mainly positive, however, a good number of students at both year levels were less sure about whether their teachers were interested in them, about the advice they received about the next stage of schooling/education from their teachers, about the expectations teachers had of them, and

about being encouraged to keep studying beyond Year 12. These views are exemplified in Figure 2.

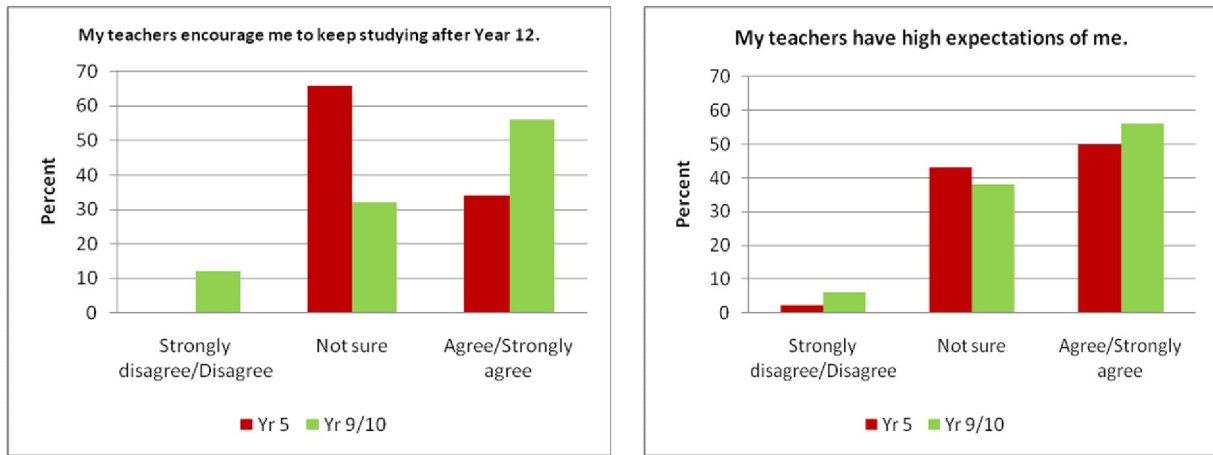


Figure 2. Stated level of agreement to sample statements about teachers' expectations

In summary, although these groups of students reported very positive views about their teachers, the data suggest that students are far less sure about issues and aspirations about further schooling and education, particularly as these might arise through expectations expressed by teachers. Although some felt their teachers provided positive messages about their future education, for many, “what happens next” in schooling and education as signposted by teachers was less clear.

Theme 2: Parents and education

As illustrated in Figure 3, most students at both year levels reported that their parents/guardians took an interest in their progress at school and encouraged them to do well at school.

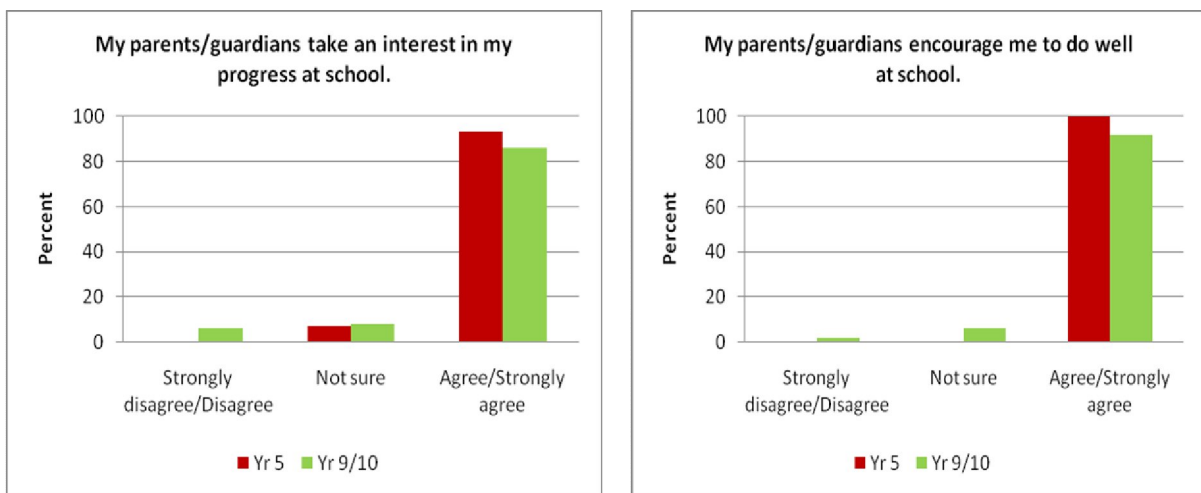


Figure 3. Stated level of agreement to sample statements about parents'/guardians' interest in child's schooling

Some uncertainty, however, was apparent for some students when asked about their parents/guardians wanting them to stay at school after Year 10 (Year 5 – 36% unsure; Year 9/10 – 10% unsure) and continuing education past Year 12 (Year 5 – 36% unsure; Year 9/10 – 20% unsure). These data suggest that, for some students, there has been little or no discussion with their parents about future education pathways or, at the least, that their parents do not hold strong views about their continuing on with their education.

In summary, although students in general report their parents as supportive of them at school and in their education, some students seem not to have engaged with their parents about any clear expectations regarding continuing their education beyond Years 10 and 12. As was the case with teachers, for many students, “what happens next” in schooling and education as signposted by parents was not clear.

Theme 3: Students and education

The vast majority of students, across both Year 5 and Year 9/10, reported the following as being important or very important for them at school:

- getting good grades (Year 5 – 91%; Year 9/10 – 94%);
- playing sport (Year 5 – 86%; Year 9/10 – 62%);
- having good friends (Year 5 – 100%; Year 9/10 – 94%);
- having fun (Year 5 – 98%; Year 9/10 – 92%);
- learning interesting things (Year 5 – 98%; Year 9/10 – 84%); and
- subject choice (Year 5 – 84%; Year 9/10 – 94%).

At a general level, students, in the main, at both Year 5 and Year 9/10 reported that they agreed/strongly agreed that they:

- were good at school work (Year 5 – 80%; Year 9/10 – 88%);
- understood what was expected of them (Year 5 – 93%; Year 9/10 – 90%);
- saw education as important to them (Year 5 – 98%; Year 9/10 – 92%) (see Figure 4);
- were interested in the subjects offered by the school (Year 5 – 78%; Year 9/10 – 81%) (see Figure 4);
- felt safe at school (Year 5 – 86%; Year 9/10 – 84%); and
- believed their school was a good school (Year 5 – 100%; Year 9/10 – 76%).

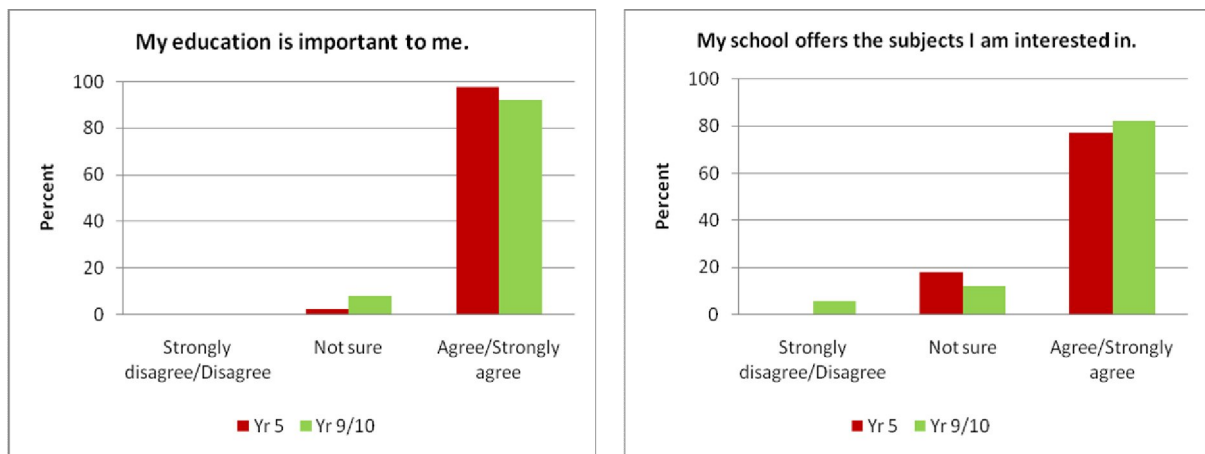


Figure 4. Stated level of agreement to sample statements about views on education

They reported, however, being much less clear on matters to do with continuing in education (some of these matters have already been noted from teacher and parent perspectives above). For example, over 30% of each of the Year 5 and the Year 9/10 students were unsure of what sort of job they wanted to have when they left school. About 20% were unsure about going on to university (notably, over 60% of Year 5 students indicated they would go to university, probably reflecting the aspirational middle-class school in the trial), with well over half not sure about taking an apprenticeship. As exemplified in Figure 5, students also reported being unsure of the plans their friends had about going on past Year 10 (Year 5 – 57%; Year 9/10 – 22%). When a similar question about staying on was asked about

continuing past Year 12, nearly 70% of Year 5 and 45% of Year 9/10 reported being unsure. Further, when asked how well prepared they felt for the next stage of their schooling, again over a third reported being “unsure.” There was a sense here that there is not much discussion among many of these groups of students about education pathways into the future. However, it should be noted that, although many are unsure, there is also a clear group who “strongly agree” that their friends plan to continue past Year 10 and Year 12 – 18% and 22% for Years 5 and 9/10 respectively.

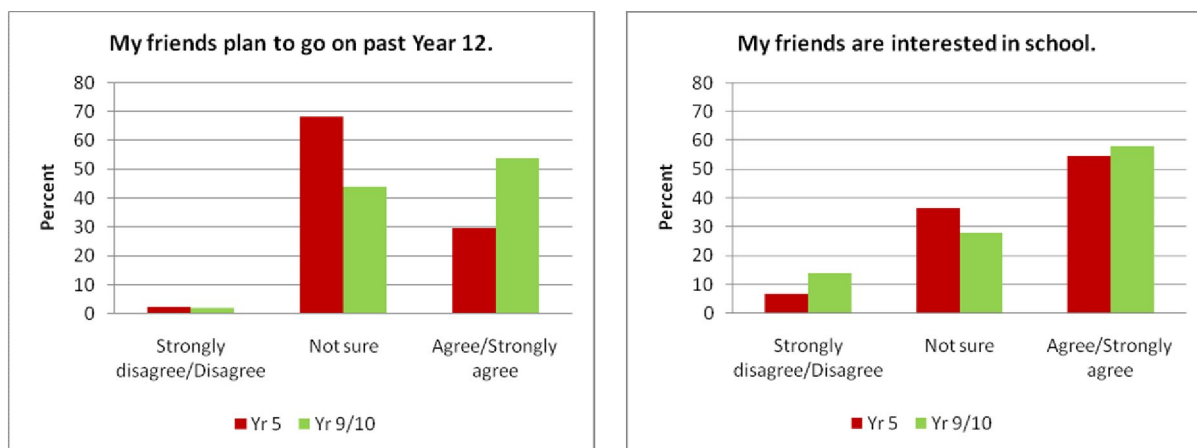


Figure 5. Stated level of agreement to sample statements about friends’ plans for further education

In summary for this theme, these groups of students typically saw themselves as educationally capable, saw education as important and were generally happy at school, but many did not seem to be highly engaged in discussions or thinking about their future educational pathways.

Conclusion

Although acknowledging that the pilot study data findings reported here must be considered tentative, these findings do highlight some key issues of interest to the broader study being undertaken and also re-enforce some of the important issues for Tasmanian students that impact on their retention in schooling and education beyond Year 10 and Year 12.

In particular, it can be argued that the majority of students in this pilot are generally positive about schooling and education. This can be seen as reassuring insofar as such positive attitudes provide at least a sound starting point for continuing engagement in schooling and education. What is much less positive is that there seems to be little discussion among students, teachers and parents, *with* students, about future schooling and educational options. Although this may not be all that surprising for the Year 5 students surveyed, it is a cause for concern among the Year 9/10 students, many of whom will need to make important educational choices in the near future. Perhaps more importantly, given the poor retention rates across the State, what the data do suggest is that conversations among students, teachers and parents about future schooling and educational pathways should be initiated as early as possible. The outcome of such conversations might well be that expectations and aspirations about future schooling are positively constructed so that continuing on past Year 10 and then past Year 12 becomes the norm, rather than the exception, for more Tasmanian young people.

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