

Philip Roberts
Melyssa Fuqua *Editors*

Ruraling Education Research

Connections Between Rurality and
the Disciplines of Educational Research

 Springer

Ruraling Education Research

“True to its title – read it again - this book proposes the *ruraling* of education research: all of it. Once digested, this proposal is difficult to ignore. The theme of “*ruraling*, used as a verb, to reframe metrocentricity and metro-normativity in education research”, is explained and developed throughout this coherent, yet wide-ranging, collection. The authors go beyond a mere proposal. They build on Roberts and Green’s 2013 accusation of the “*symbolic violence against rural people, places and communities*” perpetrated by those who fail to engage with the concept of rural. If Corbett once exhorted researchers to find a rural sociological imagination, these authors provide an activist handbook.

The book envelops multiple disciplinary perspectives, venturing beyond sociology via geographical, linguistic, psychological and socio-ecological domains to show how *ruraling* brings new insights to teaching, ethics, gender identity, tertiary education, and inclusion, for example. Leading scholars, including Roberts, Green, Reid, Guenther, Beach and White, challenge rural education researchers to create rural theory: to subvert the unquestioned application of urban-grounded theory to understanding rural contexts. Fear not, the terminological debates are discussed, while the research studies reported are paradigmatically diverse and well-designed.

This edited collection is an outcome of rural education researchers’ fora in the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE). Its relevance is global.”

—Linda Hargreaves, *University of Cambridge*

“A comprehensive, in-depth collection of rural education research that is a must read for anyone interested in rural education. Philip Roberts and Melyssa Fuqua have compiled and edited a collection of work that is at the cutting edge of contemporary understandings of the rural that challenges the reader to rethink and reposition what it means to work, live and research in the rural. Roberts and Fuqua contextualise the rural and acknowledge the complexities and disproportionate impact of COVID 19 on rural communities. Simultaneously this collection reclaims the rural as a strength and embraces the learnings from within rural communities that have much to offer to all contexts. Reimagining of rural places as ‘ruraling’ allows the reader to engage and reengage with rural research that disrupts and reframes these places away from the ‘metrocentricity and metro-normativity in education research’. A timely and welcome addition to the debates and provocations for all scholars, students and policy-makers.”

—Bernadette Walker-Gibbs, *La Trobe University*


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Chapter 1

Ruraling Education Research



Philip Roberts and Melyssa Fuqua

Abstract In this chapter, the editors of this volume establish the grounding of, and need for, a repositioning and reconsideration of rural education research. With the term ‘ruraling’ created as a means to push back against the metrocentricity embedded in much education research, we pose an argument that rural education research is an established field of study. Finally, we introduce the chapters that follow, with their focus on research that champions rural places, spaces, and people. The contributing authors speak from their rural education research experiences at once to other rural education peers, but also to peers in the broader discipline of education research.

Rural education is about the future of rural people, places, and communities in modernity. Exactly what this means, and looks like in practice, is the central debate of the discipline. The key element that unifies the discipline is the perspective that rural people, places, and communities matter, and consequently, that education needs to value and engage with a rural perspective. In a world where over half the world’s population now live in urban settings (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016), this is easier said than done—especially in a metrocentric (Roberts & Green, 2013) education system and its associated metro-normative (Green, 2013) values.

This edited book speaks to two audiences: rural education scholars and education scholars more broadly. The book operates as a contemporary collection of research that illustrates how the disciplines of education relate to rural education, and as such provides a map for rural education researchers. Simultaneously, this volume also speaks back to the broader discipline with insights for how to undertake education research that values people, places, and communities wherever they may be situated.

The chapters collected here aim to provide insights from rural education for education scholars more generally, as well as provide current scholarship for researchers

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engaging in rural contexts. As such, this edition is a cross-section of contemporary trends in rural education scholarship that works as a guide for those new to researching in and for rural contexts, as well as actively expanding the other sub-disciplines of education from a rural perspective. The volume can be considered as the next evolution from White and Corbett's (2014) 'Doing Educational Research in Rural Settings' which introduced new scholars to the particularities of researching in rural places. It also continues many thought lines in Corbett and Gereluk's (2020) 'Rural Teacher Education', though our focus here is the study of education as a discipline and not teacher education per se.

The circumstances of rural places have been a newsworthy issue in Australian and international politics over the last few years. The corresponding increase in rejecting 'globalised' policies more generally has seen rural schooling become an increasingly topical issue. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, its disproportional impact on rural communities, the closing of borders, and heightened tension amongst nations, has only accelerated the return to local concerns within nations. This political shift speaks to the increasing interest in place and space in education research over the last decade (Gulson & Symes, 2007). Here 'place' and 'space' operate as touchstones for countering centralisation and standardisation in favour of particularities and subjectivity. In the 'glocal' response to globalisation, consideration of the 'local' is becoming increasingly important and topical. Rural education research has been working against the essentialisation of 'place' and standardisation. Through this edited book, we offer insights into how to think of the 'city' or 'ed-state' as more than one site: theoretically, methodologically, and in terms of professional practice.

As Roberts and Guenther discuss in Chapter 2 of this book, the rural is a notoriously difficult concept to define (Woods, 2011). As such, we use 'rural' here as a catchall for places situated beyond major metropolitan centres and those who identify with spaces beyond these centres. We note that 'rural' is, somewhat generically, appended to 'rural studies', 'rural geography', and 'rural sociology' as a signifier of difference. We deliberately do not situate the rural in a singular spatial or cultural geography. That is work for elsewhere. For now, we invite the reader, and their research collaborators, to identify with the word should they so choose.

Ruraling?

Modernity can be defined as the move from the rural to the urban. As described in the seminal works of Tönnies and Durkheim, forms of social organisation have been changing from more communal connections to more contractual forms with the growth of urban settlements (Thomas et al., 2011). Now that urban settlement is the norm, and not the exception, ways of being that reflect this change are the common experience for the majority of the world's population—around three-quarters of the population are in highly urbanised populations, such as in Australia. Throughout this shift, the rural has continued to be associated with more communal forms of relations (Woods, 2011), and as such often seen as synonymous with the past. Not helping

is that across most of the ‘developed’ world rural places are often associated with population decline, ageing population, changing ethnic and cultural compositions, poor access to health care, economic hardship and decline, and poorer educational outcomes (Brown & Schafft, 2018). Consequently, attracting and retaining staff in the professions in rural areas is an ongoing challenge.

The problem is that debates about the levels of rural achievement and development are beset with subtle, often unspoken, comparisons with a metrocentric norm (Roberts & Green, 2013). The ‘rural’ has been defined by major, metropolitan, centres of power and not in its own terms. While rural education research has begun to problematise this construction, there still exists a line of argument couched in romantic or nostalgic notions of the rural and nations’ past. One of the challenges of rural places in modernity is to reimagine themselves in a way that does not erase what makes them distinct or supplant metro-normative values, while also ensuring they have a vibrant future.

To this end of reimagining rural places, we propose ‘*ruraling*’, used as a verb, to reframe metrocentricity and metro-normativity in education research. Readers will undoubtedly note the parallels to the notion of ‘queering’ in our positioning of ‘ruraling’ as a verb. This is deliberate, though not intended as any form of appropriation. Just as queering has been used to challenge heteronormativity (Butler, 2013), we use ‘ruraling’ to coalesce the rural education project, to challenge the discipline of education to confront its own biases against the rural, and to reform the discipline from a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014). Such a proposition is in response to Roberts and Cuervo’s (2015) question of ‘what next for rural education research?’ and engages the long history of relational conceptions of place as a dynamic construction through multiple vectors of influence (Reid et al., 2010).

The impetus for ‘ruraling’ begins with Brennan’s (2005) observation that rurality has been largely missing from educational research, other than the typical trope of disadvantage and staffing issues. Whilst fifteen years ago, we find this observation to still hold true, especially as Roberts and Downes (2016b)¹ also observed scant engagement with the concept of rurality in their analysis of Australian research. Similarly, a critical analysis of the recent federal review of rural education in Australia (Halsey, 2018) suggests little ‘rural education’ research informed the review, with policy papers seemingly most influential. While these are Australian examples, similar discussions have been occurring internationally for quite some time, most recently encapsulated by Biddle et al.’s. (2019) discussion of the way ‘rural’ is engaged in rural education research in the USA.

¹A full analysis of this research up to 2020 is under review at the time of writing.

Education as a Discipline

In referring to education as a discipline, we are drawing upon the arguments put forward by Furlong (2013) that disciplines are intellectually coherent fields of study which function institutionally and politically in their own right. Given that there is a distinct body of knowledge pertaining to education, and that it constitutes a defined entity within the Academy, we feel education meets Furlong's criteria—subsequently, we use the operational definition of education as a 'discipline'. It does, as Furlong (2013) suggests, draw upon many other disciplinary perspectives; these we operationalise as 'sub-disciplines'. Furlong and Lawn (2010) name some of the sub-disciplines of education as sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, economics, comparative and international education, and geography. The complication is that each exists in its own right as a discipline, as well as a sub-discipline within education.² Some of this confusion comes from the discipline of education's newness in the Academy compared to older disciplines and the political struggle for control over education and its practice by governments.

Following the logic above, we use 'field' as a combination of disciplines or sub-disciplines organised around a common focus. Here, we operationalise rural education as a 'field' due to its diversity of contexts and approaches to its study. We build upon Roberts and Cuervo (2015) in arguing that the future for rural education research, as a field, is a more explicit engagement with, and from, the disciplines of education. Indeed, many of the authors in this volume identify with other disciplines or fields of study. As the work we are proposing through this book is necessarily new in its stated focus and intent, we have not organised chapters around the sub-disciplines named above. It is probably too early in this development to expect the field to think and work in a way to achieve this. Instead, authors draw upon key themes and theories from the disciplines and apply them to their rural focus. For instance, much rural education research has tended to emanate from within education, primarily teacher education. Some have drawn upon the sub-disciplines, but mostly select theories that had utility to the focus of the study. Less have drawn explicitly from the original disciplines. This is perhaps one reason for the limited impact of its research; rural education research is often marginal to the Academy as a special interest for those interested in rural issues. The opportunistic nature of much of this engagement with the broader disciplines reinforces the lack of a systemic focus for the field, something this book works to overcome. Through this book, we are inviting the academic community to take rural education research forward by explicitly drawing upon the sub-disciplines of education, and to show what it has to offer those disciplines in return.

There remains, however, one further complication—the field of rural studies, itself a strong and vibrant field that draws upon rural geography and rural sociology (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016). Rural studies has had very limited engagement with education, and where it does, it is influenced by sociology and geography via their

²For detail on this history, we refer the reader to Furlong and Lawn (2010) and Furlong (2013).

rural sub-disciplines and not their education sub-disciplines. This gives rural education researchers three avenues for engaging with (at least) sociology and geography: through the original disciplines, or via their rural studies or education incarnations. The same is arguably true of the other disciplines, though apart from economics, they are not especially well developed in a rural context.

The key point here, that this book starts to address, is that rural education does not have a clear home or organising theory. Is it a distinct body of work with a distinct theoretical orientation, or is it just a location for other education research? Without an organising principle, rural education essentially cedes the ground to other disciplines, and in so doing, allows things to be done to it, rather than by it, by others perceived as having more expertise. It also surrenders some ability to reshape education research, and research generally, perpetuating the marginalisation of rural people, places, and communities. The end result is that policymakers and practitioners look for approaches and solutions for assumed ‘disadvantage’ outside of the rural to then be imported to the rural. Initiatives that originate beyond the rural, often reflecting the latest fad, generally have unintended negative consequences as they are brutally reshaped to fit the new context, without consideration of that context in its own terms. We see this often with rural education having many temporary visits by opportunistic researchers who see opportunity in the latest report of rural education disadvantage, and who largely see the solution through the prism of their own expertise and import a pre-designed programme. We also see this through one-off or short-term funding for rural-based research or educational programmes supporting best practice. That ‘the rural problem’ has been noted as far back as 1904 (Green & Reid, 2012) and reinforced as recently in 2018 (Halsey, 2018)³ indicates that these short-lived initiatives have not been helpful. Most significantly though, it only further reinforces that the field has not been able to reshape the metrocentric assumptions of educational research (Roberts & Green, 2013) more generally.

The Present Volume

In the project of ruraling the discipline of education, and advancing the rural education field, this edited book brings together a collection of leading Australian and international scholars in rural education. Through its unique approach, this book brings ‘rural’ to the disciplines of education whereas other recent rural education publications have been ‘about’ the rural, specifically rural education or rural teacher education. For instance, Schafft and Jackson (2010), White and Corbett (2014), Schulte and Walker-Gibbs (2015), and Corbett and Gereluk (2020) have been *about* rural education introducing the field to new researchers. The authors collected here have developed chapters that address significant issues in the rural education field that have relevance for the disciplines of education more generally. As such, they have situated their chapters at the intersection of the sub-disciplines of the discipline

³While an Australian example this applies equally internationally (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

of education (Furlong, 2013; Furlong & Lawn, 2010). This focus has been chosen as we, and the authors herein, feel the rural education field has matured to a point of being ready to speak more directly to the disciplines of education and education research more generally. Drawing from a two-day workshop in 2018, this book has been thoroughly discussed and considered by its contributing authors. The works herein have been reviewed by colleagues within the project team and external to it. This ensures the academic integrity of the works and consistency of focus across the works.

The well-developed, and well-theorised, approaches to understanding the particularity and subjectivities of places emanating from the rural education field enable a timely contribution to the current challenges of contemporary education research. While we argue the authors in this volume advance novel academic interpretations and approaches in their respective chapters, we also note that the volume's contribution to theory need not be new theory (even though engaging these ideas from a rural standpoint may achieve that). What this book does is bring back attention to detail, specificity, and subjectivity in education research. The ways in which we construct meaning, and the research subject, influence the application and applicability of the theory—and ensure that the theories we use remain provisional and related to the subject. This helps counter grand theories, grand narratives that, we suggest, are founded on a metro-normative world view. Consequently, the over-generalisation and application of theory are challenged by this book. Put another way, the moves to standardisation in curriculum, assessment, and education policy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) are challenged and approaches to resisting these are illustrated. In the increasing backlash to standardisation, we are observing it is important to note that cities are indeed not homogenous, each is different, and between communities/areas within cities there are extremes of difference. Thus, standardisation is as equally an act of violence upon communities in the city as the rural. The insights from rural education act, by metaphor and simile, as an explicit comment by the authors herein, to help urban researchers understand research approaches that are equally applicable in their contexts, but often not engaged with due to the appending of 'rural' to education in existing research.

While the work speaks primarily from Australia, a leading site of rural education research, it also includes perspectives from international authors in the USA and Europe, ensuring international significance and relevance. Furthermore, the later chapters in ethics speak to a noted gap in the literature. There is little work on ethics in educational research and even less regarding the ethics of research in the rural. As such, these chapters speak to a gap in rural education and provide tools for engaging marginalised communities more generally in educational research. This is important given the rise of concern for how research that is not orientated to the particularities of place and communities can cause significant harm in the way it represents them.

An Overview of Chapters

The authors in this book explore a number of considerations of sound rural research and their possible applicability to other areas of education research, as well as other key stakeholders. Underlying each of their core arguments is a desire to bolster the insights gained by research through a focus on nuance and understanding of various contexts and people. Themes of the importance of definitions (and who has the power to define), an appreciation for the variety of contexts, the potential damage that can be caused through a deficit discourse around the rural, and an understanding of rural that includes social and relational space which is fluid and unique run through the chapters and provide the basis for lessons to be learned from a multiplicity of other research disciplines. Contributing authors reflect on prior research projects from a number of contexts, highlight what they learned from their experiences, and then consider how these insights may inform other areas of research and policymaking. Due to the ubiquity of the key themes, we made the editorial decision to not break up the chapters into explicitly divided sections; however, chapters have been grouped broadly by focus area, as outlined below.

The first chapters of this book focus on understandings of ‘rural’ and ‘communities’. These chapters highlight that definitions are complex, contextualised, and—most importantly—matter. Collectively, the authors argue that bringing a more nuanced perspective of these issues to other areas of education research can lead to a better understanding of the context any education research is conducted in and with, which in turn should lead to better outcomes for students, educators, and schools. In Chapter 2, Philip Roberts and John Guenther unpack the key issues, debates, and positions surrounding the contested nature of various conceptualisations and definitions of *rural*. These problematised understandings are critical, not just in relation to the other chapters of this edition, but for educational researchers and public-policymakers more generally. Then, in Chapter 3, Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid revisit their influential model of Rural Social Space (Reid et al., 2010), which serves as a conceptual-analytic framework for considering the various dimensions of living and learning in rural places. They argue that the model can be useful in re-framing how systems and practitioners prepare for living and working in non-metropolitan settings. Simone White in Chapter 4 explores the interplay and complexity of the concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘community’. She contends that (teacher) education research would benefit from a greater understanding of rural places in order to better prepare teachers and teacher education curriculum for rural contexts. Next, in Chapter 5, Jayne Downey presents a best-practice example from the USA of how to get to know a rural community that encompasses the many dimensions of rural life. She lays out ways that education researchers, policymakers, and service organisations can utilise insights from such a process so as to improve their outcomes. Dennis Beach and Elisabet Öhrn describe in Chapter 6 how frameworks typically used in rural research can assist research in urban contexts to improve educational justice and equity. They argue that issues such as poverty and marginalisation are not simply *urban* issues and that frameworks that consider such issues as crossing socio-spatial contexts can

lead to a better understanding. In Chapter 7, Karen Eppley, Kai Schafft, and Ann Maselli explore how urban-centric policies and understandings of charter schools in the USA are enacted in rural contexts. Their discussion of the complexities of the relationship between rural charter schools and their communities sheds further light on the tenuous balance between neoliberalism and community identity. Finally, Philip Roberts, Michael Thier, and Paul Beach in Chapter 8 discuss the need to disaggregate statistical data in order to better recognise and respond to the needs and strengths of rural schools. Drawing on statistical models from Australia and the USA, they argue that different definitions of rural can lead to misleading and potentially harmful education and policy decisions.

The next set of chapters focuses on the learnings authors gained from their rural research in particular school settings, subjects, and pedagogies. The lessons they learned from research conducted in rural contexts can be applied to non-rural contexts in order to improve the effectiveness and outcomes of specific strategies. Melyssa Fuqua in Chapter 9 explores the parallels between rural pathways, advisors, and principals in terms of the importance of each role's understanding of their school community's social space. From this, she calls for a recognition of local knowledge as a vital aspect of professional learning in any educational context. John Guenther and Sam Osborne lay out a number of ethical issues that have arisen alongside the increased enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into private boarding schools in Chapter 10. In the absence of evidence that scholarships or other incentives are improving outcomes, they consider how the ethical issues arising from these incentives may lead to improving boarding education for all students. In Chapter 11, Robyn Henderson contends that elements of rural research which respect context over standardisation are preferable and informative to the field of teaching literacies. She discusses how rethinking literacy pedagogies with a greater focus on place-based and contextualised education may improve some of the negative effects of certain pedagogies. Similarly, Julie Dillon-Wallace argues in Chapter 12 that inclusion pedagogies can be better served by taking a contextualised, strengths-based approach. She claims that the strengths-based approach undertaken by rural research should improve educational outcomes for all students. In Chapter 13, Pamela Bartholomaeus explores how Linguistic Landscape (LL) research methodologies can illuminate the sociological characteristics of a community. Through this methodological lens, researchers, practitioners, and a variety of stakeholders can better come to know a community and so better support the people living and working there. Finally, in Chapter 14, Sheryl Lynn Lennon considers how poststructural and posthumanist understandings of gender performances in rural contexts can improve understandings of toxic and inequitable gender performances on a wider scale. She argues that by reconsidering the literal and figurative 'masks' being worn in these performances, more can be learned about the resistance to learning that is often a result.

These are followed by chapters that discuss the challenges and the responses in raising rural student aspirations and improving their engagement with tertiary studies. In Chapter 15, Sue Kilpatrick, Robin Katersky Barnes, Jessica Woodroffe, and Leanne Arnott discuss ways in which the community acts as a learning environment that can facilitate the use of social capital to promote aspiration. They argue that

authentic partnerships between communities and researchers can produce beneficial outcomes. Louise Pollard, Judy Skene, and Grady Venville lay out the characteristics of and challenges facing remote students in higher education in Chapter 16. They argue that a wider range of stakeholders—politicians, community, and university leaders—should consider the unique needs of this cohort in order to assist improvements in engagement and retention.

The final chapters of this edition explore some of the ethical and political considerations necessary for ‘good’ rural research. These chapters theorise the complex, invisible landscape involved in undertaking and disseminating rural research and provide suggestions as to how other fields of education research can benefit from considering such issues and taking suitable precautions. In Chapter 17, Jo-Anne Reid discusses factors that make it difficult under current policies to responsibly conduct research *with* and *for* rural places—such as the effects of geography and location on funding and reporting. She makes a case for a reconsideration of the policies and politics of academic research in order to enable sound, ethical rural research to be conducted. Finally, in Chapter 18, Natalie Downes, Jillian Marsh, Philip Roberts, Jo-Anne Reid, Melyssa Fuqua, and John Guenther outline some of the ethical issues that arise at various stages of research with focuses on defining it, conducting it, and disseminating it. They argue that other areas of education research should be aware of these issues within their own field to ensure they are ethically considering and conducting their projects. In the concluding chapter, editors Melyssa Fuqua and Philip Roberts draw together the themes presented by the contributing authors and issue provocations for future research in rural areas and across the education research disciplines.

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Chapter 2

Framing Rural and Remote: Key Issues, Debates, Definitions, and Positions in Constructing Rural and Remote Disadvantage



Philip Roberts and John Guenther

Abstract Educational research and public policy comment are often framed around notion of binaries and social construction that reference an implicit norm. For the purposes of this edition, important binaries include advantage/disadvantage, centre/periphery, and rural/urban. Similarly, terms such as ‘rural’ and ‘remote’ are often socially constructed with reference to these binaries. For instance, remote is often conceptualised as peripheral to the city by distance as well as socially and culturally. However, as this chapter discusses, for people whose families live in remote towns, it is the city that is distant and peripheral. Such perspectives are rarely considered in discussions of educational policy. To address this, and other, implicit biases, this chapter examines how language socially constricts the ‘problem’ to be solved, rather than implicitly valuing people, places, and communities.

‘Rural’ is a seemingly straight forward concept, until we attempt to define it. Indeed, this problem has been a central issue for the rural studies field for some time (Shucksmith & Brown, 2018). In this chapter, we do not so much seek to define ‘rural’ as to highlight the issues associated with existing definitions in use in order to introduce the complexities of naming and issues of power such naming reproduces. This sensitivity to naming is, we suggest, a key insight from rural education research for the broader education research community with implications for the taken for granted-ness of ‘the city’.

Researchers are faced with the issues of language and naming from the outset. This is observed by appending ‘rural’ ‘regional’ or ‘remote’ as a locational characteristic in order to signify the research as distinct. However, each term ‘rural’, ‘regional’ or ‘remote’, or even ‘country’, ‘bush’ or ‘outback’, has significant cultural and historical meaning. This meaning is often also linked to national histories and

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cultures. For instance, ‘country’ has a distinct association with class and culture in the UK compared to Australia where its use has been declining—we suspect due to changing sensibilities to class and the growth of the Indigenous rearticulation of ‘Country’ as somewhat akin to ‘homeland’ or ‘traditional lands’. Which term a researcher appends signals an often-unspoken assumption about the location and scope of the research. More so, the lack of appending a signifier carries meanings about the assumed location or context-free claims of the research.

In Australia, the term ‘regional’ is becoming the dominant label for all non-metropolitan areas. This preference appears to be because it includes larger towns or cities beyond the state capitals, and as such is distinct from ‘rural’, which tends to refer to smaller non-metropolitan towns. ‘Small towns’ denote a particular type of bounded settlement type by population size, with an ambiguous link to those living on surrounding lands (ABS, 2018). ‘Remote’, however, tends to be used to refer to locations perceived as ‘remote’ from larger towns, and increasingly synonymous with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Guenther et al., 2019). Highlighting that each is assumed to carry specific meanings, and associated considerations for education, the recent review into education in non-metropolitan Australia carried the title of ‘regional, rural and remote’ education (Halsey, 2018). Noting this complexity of language choices, we will, forthwith, use ‘rural’ as a catchall for all terms noted above, unless otherwise noted. Specifically, we will look at issues pertaining to ‘rural’ and ‘remote’, with ‘rural’ allowing an exploration of the broad debates in rural studies and much public policy. We then deliberately focus up ‘remote’ as a distinct notion, as a case in point.

Before moving to discussing these definitions, we make one final observation. In many rural studies, the rural is often studied as part of urbanisation (Shucksmith & Brown, 2018). That is, the rural is constituted in some way related to the urban, partly because the rural only developed as a distinct category through urbanisation. How the rural is then positioned, in comparison with the urban or as a distinct social phenomenon, forms one of the central distinctions in defining the rural that we will outline below. What we find curious, however, is that the ‘urban’—itself used as a synonym for ‘the city’—and the ‘the city’ are reified. Cities are inherently diverse and made up of many different spaces, each with different constructions, challenges, and needs. Think, for instance, about the spatial geography of a typical city with gradations and interactions of wealthy and less wealthy areas, dense to less dense housing, low crime to higher crime areas, industries, suburbs, and so forth. Recognising the many disparities within, and access to, the city, we have witnessed the emergence of ideas such as ‘the right to the city’ (Harvey, 2008), which reinforces that not all people who live in the urban environment have access to what ‘the city’ signifies. Equally then, the city is itself not one space but many, with perhaps the city as ‘remote’ to marginalised populations within it as it is to population located geographically far from it.

With the absence of a rural-related signifier to research, it is often assumed that the phenomena are ‘context free’. Indeed, in many circles, being ‘context free’, or more so shown to have no observable variation related to geographical location, is itself valorised as the benchmark of validity. However, to many rural researchers,

this absence reinforces a form of metrocentricity (Roberts & Green, 2013) where the metropolitan is the norm, resulting in a form of metro-normativity (Green, 2013). This perspective draws upon the complexity of defining the rural, and the view that rural places are each unique and distinct, as many chapters in this book reinforce. The logic in operation then is that by not referencing the importance of context, an assumed 'norm' is enacted, which, given the dominance of urban areas in population and the social imaginary, is metropolitan in character. Ironically though, much spatial theory that has been influential in rural education research leading to this form of thinking in the last decade (Roberts & Green, 2013) itself often emanates from Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) who wrote about, and from, spatiality and the city—Paris and Los Angeles, respectively. The take up of this theory by rural researchers suggests an innate sense of difference, and an affinity with theoretical work that helps frame this distinctness. That the work has been influential (Gulson & Symes, 2007), but not transformative, in education research not explicitly situated in the rural also suggests the power of universalising discourses in modern education. We raise this issue to suggest that, at the risk of complicating things even further, not appending a locational signifier to research creates as many problems as doing so. By raising this issue, albeit in the example of the rural and remote, we ask education researchers to consider the implications of this decision on their work and findings.

Understanding 'Rural'

We contend here that the 'rural' is not well defined in educational research. This then has implications for the generalisability of the research findings and the appropriateness of resultant policy and practice (Roberts & Downes, 2016). Referencing the rural studies field, one which we conceive as encompassing rural sociology and rural geography, a number of trends in the way the rural is understood are discernible.

Shucksmith and Brown (2018) characterise these trends in defining the rural as a distinction between a social constructivist and a more structural/demographic approach. The social constructivist approach, more commonly associated with European rural studies, understands the rural as a social and cultural phenomenon that is produced, and distinct in and of itself. Alternatively, the structural/demographic approach, which is more commonly associated with North American rural studies, understands the rural as constituted of measurable characteristics that can be compared to other places. More recently, Bollman and Reimer (2020) have recast this discussion in terms of spatial characteristics and the characteristics of individual or theory versus operational variables. While not universal distinctions, these differences can be observed in the academic journals situated in different national contexts. The differences can also be observed in the different methodologies employed and the construction of the research question, and the resultant methods. In Australia, the rural studies field is not well developed, with related research tending to sit somewhat ambiguously across both perspectives. It seems that rural communities, and those with an affinity for them, are influenced by the social constructivist approach,

whereas public policy is more aligned with structural/demographic approach. This is arguably due to the political perspective of rational economics and the need to justify resource redistribution based on simply quantifiable measures.

Linking the social constructivist and structural/demographic perspective in order to arrive at a model for defining the rural was an aim of rural studies in the early to mid-2000s. This resulted in three influential constructions that we introduce below. This push was predicated on the truism that the rural is a difficult site to define due to the multiplicity of meanings of the rural. Recognising this complexity, the rural is generally defined in some combination of demographic, geographic, and cultural dimension. Importantly, the relationships between these elements are dynamic. There are three key approaches to defining the rural from this period. Firstly, Halfacree's (2006) Three-Fold Model of (rural) Spaces included rural locality (geographic), formal representations of the rural, and everyday lives of the rural. Next, Balfour et al.'s (2008) Generative Theory of Rurality saw rurality as context, forces (space, place, time), agencies (movement, systems, will) and resources (situated, material, psychosocial). Finally, Cloke's (2006) Three Theoretical Frames encompasses the functional (land use and life linked to land), the political-economic (social production), and the social (culture and values).

Ultimately, while a single definition was elusive, the search was far from futile. Indeed, the ensuing debates highlighted the complex influences on the phenomena of the rural—something that other fields such as education are, arguably, yet to engage in. Instead, an increasingly common refrain seems to be a version of: we know the rural is hard to define so let's recognise that and move on. In the end what is important here is not necessarily some definitional conclusion, as that is probably unachievable, but the act of understanding how the rural is constructed in relation to the research task at hand. Doing so helps us reflect on the limitations and affordances of our research approaches, consider the forces constructing the rural and the phenomena we are exploring, and temper our conclusions. Here again, we can learn from rural studies, where in contemporary publications authors do not go out of their way to define the rural. However, the influence of this definitional work in the background is clearly evident in the way the rural is prefaced, phenomena constructed, research approached and written—it is foundational to all the work and understood by the field.

This debate is not new to the rural education field, though it has been largely focussed in the North American scene. For instance, Howley, Theobald, and Howley argued that an understanding of rural was an essential component of rural education research in 2005. They (Howley et al. 2005) suggested that such meanings were often lost in the pursuit of positivist research in order to have an influence on policy and practice.

Reflecting on fifteen years as editor of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, Coladarci (2007) also argued that an understanding of rurality was important, though largely absent, from rural education research. Such calls continued with Howley et al. (2014) again arguing for a greater engagement with rurality in rural education research. That this thread of debate has continued in the North American scene is both curious and significant. Curious, as its persistence suggests an ongoing perceived

need from certain researchers, yet significant as its continuation suggests, it has not been achieved in any significant manner. Indeed, the notion of needing to engage with rurality is not universally accepted. Most recently, for instance, Biddle et al. (2019) revisited Coladarci (2007), though this time to suggest that an engagement with rurality was itself not necessary, and indeed may itself be limiting to rural education research. While we take up this point further below, this is not a position we agree with. Instead, our position is that not engaging with what constitutes our understanding of rurality is fundamentally an act of symbolic violence against rural people, places, and communities (Roberts & Green, 2013). It can lead to normative assumptions about context that in rural educational contexts can be damaging for students (Guenther & Osborne, 2020).

The Australian rural education scene has not been devoid of these debates, though their prevalence is much less. In 2005, Brennan suggested a need to ‘put rurality [back] in the educational agenda’ (p. 11). This was further taken up by Roberts and Cuervo (2015) as an ongoing absence, suggesting that defining rurality was needed to better orientate our research to the phenomena we are examining. This chapter, indeed, this volume, continues this line of argument. Perhaps most significantly, the pre-eminent scholars using these theories in education, Reid and Green, have taken the various elements of defining the rural from rural studies to develop the rural social space model which combines characteristics of economy, demography, and geography (Reid et al., 2010). We do not explore this here as it is revised in this volume in Chapter 3. This model marks an important innovation for the rural education field, and education research in general, as it provides an approach for researchers to engage the situatedness of the phenomena they are researching.

Making Rural (Education) Policy

As education policy become increasingly standardised, and national bureaucracies move to education ‘evidence’ clearinghouses, what counts in education research becomes increasingly fraught. As noted by Coladarci (2007), and supported by Biddle et al. (2019), one of the reasons for *not* noting definitions of the rural in research has been to increase impact upon policy and practice. Here, context-free research is deemed to be more valuable, even valid, for making policy and redistributing public funds. This poses a significant challenge for rural education research and the education research community more generally. In educational research, the distinction between the social constructivist and structural/demographic perspective of the rural creates a conflict between the more socially and culturally orientated research of experiences and the more policy-orientated research related to resource distribution and outcomes. In making decisions about the effectiveness and efficiency of the education system, developing and evaluating policy interventions, and determining resourcing, the structural/demographic perspective tends to take precedence in most nations, including Australia.

The spatial turn in social theory (Gulson & Symes, 2007) reminds us that all educational phenomena are situated, be they in the rural or the city, as both rural and city are categories that collapse their infinite diversity into a convenient label. Problematically, those labels are themselves opposite ends of an undefined spectrum of assumption. The challenge ahead for educational research is to speak back to the power that assumes a false uniformity is more valid, and instead prosecute the case that recognition of the situatedness of phenomena is indeed the path towards true validity. In developing this case for the necessary situatedness of educational research, rural education scholarship provides several cases in point—as presented in this book.

While Australian rural education researchers often engage with social constructivist notions of rurality, sadly most research that impacts policy tends to use a limited version of demographically and geographically defined notions of rurality, using measures defined by ‘statistical geography’ (discussed later). These are expressed solely in a statistical frame of analysis and considered as a policy variable, with, for example, attendance, funding, senior secondary outcomes, and standardised literacy and numeracy test results reported against a statistically imposed remoteness structure. Remoteness is a classification structure within the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) (ABS, 2018). In this classification, remoteness areas are based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) (University of Adelaide, 2018) and measure the remoteness of a point to the nearest urban centre in each of five categories (ranging from least to furthest distance). The Australian Bureau of Statistics has multiple approaches to representing spatial geographies, with statistical structures referring to cities and towns linked to settlement density, available (Hugo, 2014). Statistical geographies other than the ASGS are based upon houses and/or settlements, such as the small towns’ statistical geography (ABS, 2018). These are not appropriate for rural education research as they remove the settlement from its surrounds and create a number of data holes, such as assuming all students at a rural school live in the towns’ statistical area boundary, something we know to be untrue. Attempts to use such measures may well reveal the researchers’ ignorance towards the rural and the composition of rural schools. When it comes to defining larger regions, the ASGS is the main reference point in Australia (see Chapter 8), for the purposes of this book, ASGS is the main structure in use. Reinforcing the metro-normative notions that inform these statistics though, the Australian Bureau of Statistics remoteness structure notes ‘remoteness is dynamic, it generally declines over time as new services are built and the road network is improved’ (ABS, 2013, n.p.). It seems that the irony of the definitions in use is that they ultimately aim to erase rurality.

Rural Colonialism

Finally, writing in and from Australia, it is important to foreground that these discussions occur in the context of settler colonialism. The idea of rural and remote did not exist prior to the arrival of European colonists. Similarly, education had been

occurring for tens of thousands of years and continues to occur. As such, the very notions being put forward here are themselves implicated with the ongoing dispossession and marginalisation of First Nations peoples. While this has a distinct character and history in Australia, it is common in many places across the globe. As Corbett and Gereluk (2020) state, writing from Canada:

The very idea of the rural has been freighted with racialized meaning. It is often constructed as the gendered quintessence of the national consciousness: the space of the farmers, loggers, fishers, railway workers, road-builders, surveyors, and miners around whom the mythology of exploration, settlement, and nation building have been formed. The field of rural education has functioned as a space for settlers to tell of their places, sometimes acknowledging its colonized past often recognizing their own immigrant roots. It is arguable that historically, these stories and conversations between Indigenous peoples and settlers largely did not overlap or converge. In fact, they were more often very different accounts of both national history and present socio-political circumstances. This ideological separateness, and stark contrasts in the telling of the stories about our educational past, have often obscured the unacknowledged polyvocality, complexity, and complicity in a long, more troubling history. (p. v)

Corbett and Gereluk's (2020) observations hold in the Australian context. The result of this history is the imposition of a public policy framework, and cultural justification, transported from the British experience of modernity. Such assumptions position places beyond the city, the people who live there, and First Nations peoples as marginal. In the remainder of this chapter, we turn to examine the language of 'remote' and Australia's First Nations peoples as a case in point.

Conceptualising Remote

The word 'remote' conjures ideas of distant, isolated, and beyond the periphery (Taylor, 2016). Statistical geography in Australia at least picks up on these ideas. The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) measures the degree of remoteness, as 'a purely geographic measure of remoteness, which excludes any consideration of socio-economic status, "rurality" and populations size factors' (University of Adelaide, 2018). However, this linear conception of degree of remoteness misses the diversity and richness of the landscapes and peoples who live in these 'settlements at the edge' to pick up on the description used by Taylor et al. (2016).

Many of the more than 1000 settlements within the 'remote' region of Australia are occupied by Australia's First Nations peoples, who often resent the term 'Indigenous' because of the language and cultural diversity across the nations. A large proportion of the land is Aboriginal Freehold or subject to Native Title claims. Aboriginal people living in their communities see some advantage in capital cities being distant from them and they see advantage in being able to maintain cultural practices, law, and language. History for these people on the 'edge' extends well beyond the relatively short period of colonisation, but the impact of colonisation/settlement/invasion, racist policies, marginalisation, and frontier conflicts has left a legacy of trauma, grief, and loss in many communities.

However, there are other kinds of settlements at the edge. There are mining towns (e.g. Nhulunbuy in Arnhem Land), service centres (like Alice Springs in central Australia), pastoral leases, and rural communities and towns built on tourism (such as Yulara at Uluru). While the First Nations communities tend to have relatively stable populations, the communities where non-Indigenous people live tend to be more transient. Access to the full range of education, health, and community services otherwise available in urban and metropolitan areas is limited in all remote communities, but more so in the smaller First Nations communities. However, it is important to note that there is more to settlements at the edge than statistical geography might suggest and the discourse of relative disadvantage promulgated by the hegemony is not necessarily shared by those who live in the remote.

Hegemonic Rhetoric

Many researchers have fallen into the trap of adopting an acritical approach to their research on rural issues, inadvertently adopting a discourse that forms part of an unchallenged (maybe unchallengeable) self-perpetuating ‘policy paradigm’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Indeed, it may be in their interest to do so, given the problem-solving nature of research. If research funding is allocated to solving a given educational problem, then the job of the research is to solve the problem. In rural spaces, problems abound. The complexity of problems suggests a need for a critical dialogue with the hegemonic structures that ignore those who Apple (2017, p. 250) describes as ‘absent presences’ who might be considered as ‘irrational’ (e.g. parents who want to see their children be educated in a so-called disadvantaged community). However, the complexity of rurality is such that the critical dialogue is not just between us (as the rural) and them (as the non-rural) because:

the discursive formation of the rural rests on a complex hegemony of domination which both materially and culturally constitutes an acceptance and belonging for some and a marginalisation and exclusion for others. (Clope & Little, 1997, pp. 6–7)

Nevertheless, in the last decade, a major problem has been the ‘gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Turnbull, 2018) particularly in places defined as ‘remote’, and going back further, there is the related problem of ‘overcoming Indigenous disadvantage’ (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016). The apparent ‘tyrannies of distance’ (Lamb et al., 2014), which disadvantage those who are classified almost arbitrarily as rural or remote (Lamb et al., 2014, p. 66) as if these classifications are axiomatically given, are in many instances tacitly attributed as causes thinly veiled as ‘factors’ or ‘effects’ (Wilson et al., 2018) despite the acknowledged complexities of context (Lietz et al., 2014). The axiomatic ‘given-ness’ of these ascribed characteristics leads to a universalised ‘aspatial’ (Clope, 2006, p. 20) rhetoric which constructs truth as if it were normative objective common sense, sustaining ‘relations of domination’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 207). To challenge the ‘common sense’ of discursive rhetoric is to challenge

the hegemony, and for researchers, this may lead to a loss of funding, dismissal of credibility, and outright rejection of evidence, as illustrated in Chapters 10 and 18 of this volume.

Power of Naming

Naming of problems in this way becomes a powerful vehicle to reinforce the hegemony's discursive attempts to problematise (in the sense of making problematic) issues such as rurality, remoteness, and indigeneity. For example, the close proximity of 'Indigenous' to 'disadvantage' may imply that indigeneity is the disadvantage. Similarly, the proximity of 'closing' and 'the gap' may imply (1) that there is one gap; (2) that the 'gap' should be closed (representing a homogenisation as opposed to a respect for diversity); and possibly, (3) that there is a universal (aspatial) benchmark that defines the required performance standard. The voices of the irrational 'others' (e.g. the rural, remote, or Indigenous person) then becomes silenced in favour of the voices of the 'rational' or 'common-sense' hegemony. Naming sometimes subtly infers an opposite connotation. For example, consider the following statement from an Australian Government funding announcement:

The Government is investing in our next generation of Australia's leaders by encouraging Indigenous students to dream; to have big, bold aspirations and to succeed. (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017)

Here, we see all Indigenous Australian students aspatially lumped into the same basket (while the intent is clearly directed to those living in remote communities) having no dreams, small aspirations, and failing. Naming then carries with it an air of legitimacy, self-reinforced by its own discursive power. This naming or 'generic representation' contributes to the 'hegemonic universalization of a particular representation' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 201) and so in the examples we give, all rural, remote, or all Indigenous people are represented as disadvantaged.

What Is 'Dis-Advantage'?

But what is 'disadvantage'? And what is 'advantage'? To a large extent, the term 'disadvantage' in political discourse is defined by what it is associated with. For example, the 2018 Closing the Gap report (Turnbull, 2018) couples disadvantage 'and determinants of health and wellbeing' (p. 12), 'and poverty' (p. 42), 'and developmental vulnerability' (p. 46), 'or vulnerable families and communities' (p. 47), 'and exclusion' (p. 80), 'and underlying factors that drive violent and criminal behaviour' (p. 119). But the word 'advantage' does not appear, and the term 'disadvantage' is never defined. While the Prime Minister urged us to 'continue to maintain a long-term

vision of what success looks like, and importantly how success is defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves' (p. 7), the narrow list of targets related to child mortality, early childhood education, school attendance, reading and numeracy, year 12 attainment, employment, and life expectancy (p. 10) appears to limit an understanding of success and advantage to a proscribed set of values that determine what is axiologically and ontologically important. As an aside, it is interesting to see that disadvantage does not appear in the 2020 Closing the Gap report, except in relation to its origins in policy.

All these associations do point to the 'intersectional' nature of social disadvantage (Platt & Dean, 2016). For example, being 'rural' is not necessarily a disadvantage, but being a 'rural youth' when educational opportunities beyond primary or secondary schooling are limited may well be a disadvantage. Conversely, being a 'rural tradesperson' may be an advantage, especially if you are employed in an industry such as mining, where pay levels and opportunities for professional learning are high. The defining features of advantage and disadvantage become blurry when the ontological and axiological positions associated with the rural do not line up neatly with those of metropolitan. For example, while wealth is often described as a characteristic of advantage (Dean, 2016), if the ancient connections to your land, culture, and language are ontologically and cosmologically more important than the apparent temporal experiences of wealth, whose definition of advantage is correct? However, the measurement systems of the hegemon tend to work with the proximal indicators or objects of disadvantage. For example, in the Australian My School's Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), the formula explicitly includes remoteness and indigeneity as an indicator of advantage such that:

$$\text{ICSEA (student)} = \text{SEA (student)} + \text{student Indigenous status} + \text{SEA (school cohort)} + \text{Percent Indigenous student enrolment} + \text{Remoteness (ACARA, 2013, p. 10)}$$

These understandings of advantage and disadvantage as situated contextually, culturally, relationally, and socially should lead us to reconsider how we do education in the rural (Guenther & Bat, 2013; Guenther et al., 2014; Osborne & Guenther, 2013) and how we do research in the rural (Guenther et al., 2015, 2018). A critical view of our position, of power, of history, of place will help us to see where advantage lies in rural education and where inequities and disadvantages are maintained.

Silences: Who Is Silent in Western Empiricism?

The feverish activity of the last 10 years in trying to close gaps, overcome disadvantage, and improve outcomes in the rural has resulted in a corresponding amount of research activity responding to the stated gaps, the disadvantages, and the poor outcomes. The growth of research about the rural, however, is not matched by a growth of research by or for the rural. The numerous attempts, for example, to find 'what works' in the rural, particularly as it affects Indigenous people (Al-Yaman & Higgins, 2011; Goodrick, 2012; What Works, 2011), overwhelm the quiet voices,

except where they align with the dominant policy paradigm. A corresponding concern with ‘best practice’ (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2015; Office of the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services, 2011) which along with ‘what works’ tends to deny diversity and reinforces aspatial homogenisation. For example, the AIEF’s *Compendium of Best Practice* (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2015) claims to offer best practice for Indigenous boarding, but fails to consult with students or parents, relying solely on the voices of school and boarding staff. In a similar vein, the ‘what works’ literature examines the successes of often aspatial interventions, and in so doing silences those who have seemingly failed or taken alternative pathways to success.

Lack of Evidence—A Philosophical Issue

The reasons for silencing the peripheral others, for essentialising and homogenising advantage, for intervening with aspatial interventions, and for the hegemonic ‘naming’ of problems and solutions, to a large extent result from the philosophical underpinnings of policy paradigms, which in turn dictate the discourses ascribed to the rural. For example, ontologically, if what is ‘real’ emerges from the metropolis, the democratic weight of numbers subsumes or denies alternative rural realities (take for example the discourse on educational pathways to ‘real’ jobs). Similarly, axiologically, if what is valued is individual achievement in education (e.g. reflected in individual performance testing), then communitarian and collaborative approaches to learning (as might be preferred in many Aboriginal communities) are dismissed as illogical, impractical, or invalid. Likewise, if epistemological truth is delivered through formalised teacher-student relationships, it leaves little room for other delivery mediums (e.g. learning from country or intergenerational learning).

Research evidence then, overwhelmingly, responds to and inevitably reinforces the philosophical assumptions of the dominant non-rural hegemon. The relative dearth of evidence which comes from a rural standpoint, or which treats the non-rural as peripheral, is a product of these dynamics (see, for example, White, 2016). They are reinforced and strengthened by discourses of power (Vicars & Mckenna, 2013). Further, they privilege some forms of evidence over others, for example numbers over narratives (Bansel, 2012). And the design of research, including ethical approvals, may ignore the investigation of ontologically real rural assumptions and favour the ethical requirements of the non-rural (university) hegemon (White et al., 2012).

Conclusion

When it comes to framing ‘rural’ and ‘remote’, the act of naming or not naming is fraught. Our objective here has not been to propose some Faustian bargain for researchers. Instead, the perspective that we have put forward here is that to not

name the spatial composition of the research, and what that composition means to us in the research, is an act of symbolic violence (Roberts & Green, 2013) that only further marginalises rural people, places, and communities, and particularly First Nations peoples. While we have focussed on the impact upon the rural and First Nations peoples, we have aimed to highlight how these parallel to all spaces and places, and the diverse geographies and social compositions of all places. To assume that place, and context, does not matter is ultimately an act of power, that works in the interests of power. We invite researchers to join us in the work of speaking back to placeless power, and to assist researchers engaging in this work we have outlined several lines of thought that we hope they will take up, and further unravel.

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Chapter 3

Rural Social Space: A Conceptual-Analytical Framework for Rural (Teacher) Education and the Rural Human Services



Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid

Abstract The model of rural social space developed by Reid et al. (2010) draws attention to key issues impacting on the professional and social dimensions of living and learning in rural places. This chapter elaborates on the workings of the model by illustrating with examples from a number of large-scale rural research studies. The case examples highlight the complexities and richness of the social, cultural, and environmental histories of specific places and how these impact on the relationships and social structures operating at any given time. In this way, it explicates the value of the model and how it operates as a resource to help understand any place. It is argued that understanding the implications of rural social space can support professional practitioners, policy-makers, and systems to think differently, and more productively, about the potential and possibilities for working and living in particular non-metropolitan settings. By recognising this, the chapter supports the need to challenge deficit models of the rural and other marginalised social categories.

Introduction: Understanding Rural Social Space

Preparing new professionals for life and work in rural and remote settings has a less than satisfactory history in terms of its efficacy and success. The difficulties of attracting and retaining teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals for small rural townships and their environs means that local inhabitants struggle with the effects of a transient population of public servants and professionals, and these communities can lack the social amenities and services that characterise larger towns and cities. With reference to rural education in particular, the significance of space, place, and geography as key reference-points for our understanding and researching education in rural places has emerged from two recent studies focussed on

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preparing professionals to live and work in rural settings. Both the ‘Rural (Teacher) Education Project’ [R(T)EP] (Green, 2008) and its successor-project, ‘Renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia’ [*TERRAnova*] (Reid et al., 2012a, b) sought to better understand the nature of rural professional experience in the Australian context. Our aim in these studies was to inform teacher and wider professional education, by focussing attention on systems (R[T]EP), and communities (*TERRAnova*). On the basis of clear indications of locational disadvantage and spatial inequality across research sites in rural NSW, for instance, the educational effects of two key issues—poverty and Indigeneity—the R(T)EP project concluded that:

... more attention needs to be given to the geographical overdetermination of rural social and educational disadvantage, moreover from a whole-of-government, cross-agency perspective. Educationally, the crucial impact of place and community needs to be better understood. Further, there is little understanding of space with regard to either policy or pedagogy, although this is becoming an issue of great interest in sociology and other disciplines, and also in community and social planning. (Green, 2008, p. 5, emphasis added)

The need for a better understanding of space and place (‘spatiality’) for teacher education and rural schooling became an important issue for *TERRAnova*, subsequently, which took a broader, national perspective on the preparation of teachers for rural schools. The lack of attention to place and space in educational research has meant that teachers are prepared with generalised, ‘metrocentric’ understandings about society, students, and learning. Although there is much talk about ‘context’ in schooling, and the need to attend to it, particularly in terms of the ‘funds of knowledge’ and capabilities that children bring with them to schools (Moll et al., 1992) and their implications for teaching (Zipin, 2009), there is little effective education or preparation for new teachers in this regard. Out of this concern developed a model of what we called *rural social space* (RSS) (Reid et al., 2010), which subsequently operated as a key aspect of the overall conceptual framework for the *TERRAnova* Project. Further explicating this model is our purpose in this chapter.

The rural social space model draws attention to key issues impacting on the lives and learning of people living in particular places. It highlights rural places, but in fact it is a resource to help understand any place. Its purpose is to support us to complexify our thinking about any place, rather than simplifying it. In this way, it is not a general representation that simply provides information about a place, but rather a heuristic to assist (student) teachers and other pre-service professionals to think about it deeply enough to better prepare them to live and work with the people in it. By highlighting the complexities and richness of the social and cultural histories that have been (and indeed are still being) made in these specific and material places, for instance, teachers are challenged to think differently, and more productively, about the potential and possibilities for teaching and learning in that particular place.

We believe such an approach is necessary for teacher education in particular, because of the real effects of an over-determined ‘deficit’ view of rural schooling which still predominates across school systems, staff, communities, and classrooms in this country. We begin by considering the effects of this view and then provide an elaboration of the RSS model with its various phases and dimensions worked

through in detail, in terms of its elements and their interconnections as a whole, using examples from the *TERRAnova* site-studies (Reid et al., 2012b) to illustrate. We conclude the chapter with an argument for the utility of a model such as RSS in pre-service curriculum for teacher education, and indeed other (rural) professional fields, to enable them to meet the challenge of taking seriously the needs of rural children and their communities. Our view is that, more generally, the RSS model provides an insight from rural education research and scholarship that may be helpful for other education disciplines in seeking to engage with the particularities of place and, relatedly, the politics of difference.

Challenging the Deficit Model

While state education departments around Australia continuously struggle with the task of staffing rural schools (Roberts, 2004; Reid et al., 2010, 2012a; McKenzie et al., 2011; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Downes & Roberts, 2018), the effects of this on rural children and their educational aspirations and achievements are severe (Halsey, 2018). One of the lasting impressions gained from our *TERRAnova* site visits and studies of the rural towns where the research was carried out was that there is a tacitly generalised expectation among many rural children and their families, developed from the typically rapid turnover of staff in rural schools, that teachers assigned to these schools are sometimes not really interested in them, or even in their education. This expectation was actually articulated and recorded in a university-organised visit to a remote north-western town in NSW during the implementation of one of the range of ‘incentive’ schemes to attract teachers to rural schools, over ten years ago now. A small group of Aboriginal children had lined up to farewell the visiting student teachers who had spent two days in their school. These university students were taking part in a scheme that encouraged pre-service teachers to visit rural schools as part of their undergraduate programmes, to demystify and familiarise them with the communities, schools, and opportunities offered ‘outback’. As their large, dusty, four-wheel-drive vehicle headed out of town towards the highway, a young girl called out to the departing vehicle: “See you when you don’t come back!”

For us, her words were a clear and cynical challenge to (rural) teacher education’s espoused sense of commitment to students and schools (White & Reid, 2008). They reflect her lived experience and an internalised history of a dialogic ‘dance of disinterest’ in schooling in her rural community. From this child’s point of view, the teachers she has known have never seemed interested in teaching in her town, and almost all of them had passed through very quickly. Some stayed a year or two, some a couple of terms, some only weeks. And she in turn has already (not yet mid-way through primary school) become disheartened, discouraged, by this ‘churn’ in her teachers—unwilling to invest in her own commitment to her schooling—and disinterested in learning from them. The issue for the sustainability of her community, of

course, is that, without the capacities that education can provide, she and her neighbours will be unable to support its continued health and success in ways that they can determine themselves. Our argument has been that, without teacher education that commits to the particularities of place and space, these effects, as registered in national student achievement data, ongoing social disadvantage, and poor life chances (Vinson et al., 2015), will undoubtedly continue in all ‘hard to staff’ areas, and particularly those that are rural and remote.

A deficit model of rural schooling is promoted in the public consciousness through this sort of official naming of the rural as problematic, as difficult to staff, and the resulting need for ‘incentives’ to sustain the practice of teachers using rural placements to advance their own careers (Roberts, 2004). A fear of the ‘Outback’, the myth of the loneliness of rural living, of snakes and dirt roads and dust—the fear of the ‘wide brown land’ beyond the mountains—is real in the Australian consciousness (Green & Letts, 2007; Reid et al., 2010). Australians who are relatively ‘safe’ in the comfort of the city have learnt to wake in fright at the idea of the world ‘outback’ through representations of the rural in songs and stories, movies, and popular media accounts. These paint confronting pictures of drought and decline; of the failure of rural schools to achieve educational outcomes comparable to those of city schools; of Aboriginal students failing to thrive in the schools we have provided; of low achievement, poor attendance, inadequate or inappropriate subject offerings; and Indigenous communities ravaged by alcoholism and abuse. Yet, as we argue here, although these are based on real situations and figures, they are only representations. They are not ‘the truth’ in some places, and they are most certainly not the ‘whole truth’ in many.

All of the researchers involved in the projects that inform this chapter were teacher educators working in universities with campuses located in rural areas. While the deficit view of rural life impacts just as strongly on other professions, we focused on teaching and proceeded with the pragmatic assumption that many of the graduates from our own institutions would indeed decide to teach in country schools. This is because they were themselves country people, more often than not, and understood that the myths and rumours about rural places were never the whole story. But we also know that such an assumption is insufficient and inadequate as a means for systems to ensure teacher supply and commitment to rural schools. We argued, therefore, that teacher education courses need to do far more than is currently done to demystify rural teaching, and to provide a realistic preparation for rural schools that speaks back to the deficit views outlined above. Valuing rural locations ourselves, we wanted to emphasise that *rural social space* is richly complex and contradictory—different in almost every location—and that many rural communities are characterised by extremes of wealth, age, health, and capacity, as well as racial and cultural diversity. The important thing to recognise and acknowledge is that *rural places are not all the same*, and they are not *all* difficult to staff or work in. Moving beyond the stereotypes symbolically evoked in descriptions of the rural ‘problem’ in education is essential for sustaining and enhancing the diversity of rural communities.

The purpose of ensuring that teacher education foregrounds and works with the idea of *rural social space* as part of the professional preparation of teachers is to

begin to unsettle and complexify this stereotype, demystify the myths, and allow prospective teachers to understand the realities of life in rural places. Modelling and understanding the distinctive rural social space in any location will not ensure that it will be attractive or bearable for all people, of course, which is quite understandable. But we see the need for teacher education to ask pre-service teachers to engage with the idea of rural social space, to challenge the generalised deficit view of rurality as disadvantage (or indeed ‘deficit’), and highlight the need for teachers to prepare themselves to enter it. We argue that this may serve to stop any teacher arriving at a school *not* knowing what they are in for, expecting deficiency, and because of this, unintentionally damaging the children they leave behind.

Conceptualising Rural Social Space

Our effort to conceptualise rural places in terms of the social space produced in them is an attempt to go beyond received definitions and understandings of the rural. As we argue elsewhere (Reid et al., 2010), quantitative understandings of the rural based on demographic and other social-analytic data must be enriched, and attendant constructions of rural space in both geographic and cultural terms allowed for. The *TERRAnova* Project, for instance, worked with a particular formulation of the ‘rural’, drawing on contemporary American work on ‘rural literacies’, which conceptualises ‘rural’ as:

a quantitative measure, involving statistics on population and region as described by the U.S. Census; as a geographic term, denoting particular regions and areas or spaces and places; and as a cultural term, one that involves the interaction of people in groups and communities. (Donehower et al., 2007, p. 2, our added emphasis)

This threefold definition brings together the abstractions of statistical-quantitative measurement, the materiality of geographic and topographic formations, relationships and connections, and the emotional impact of social and cultural interaction. It seemed to us an inclusive way of embracing the differences across the range of people and places outside of metropolitan settings, commonly elided by the generic term ‘rural’. Methodologically, this definition has the advantage of combining quantitative and qualitative research and information—bearing in mind that, historically, quantitative work has been dominant in rural education research used to inform policy, and remains so today (Halsey, 2018).

The notion of *space* as described by Green and Letts (2007) is one that combines the empirical and the metaphorical, so that it foregrounds socio-spatial considerations in thinking about the challenges associated with rural teaching and rural (teacher) education. This is important because, as Halfacree (2006) noted, rurality as a concept is “inherently spatial” (p. 44). Hence, when Donehower et al. (2012) stressed that “[i]t is important to define rural not only demographically and geographically, but culturally as well” (p. 7), they were emphasising meaning and experience. How the rural is *lived* is central to this—how people and communities understand their

existence and their place in the world, in living through it: the particular ‘culture’ that has developed in a particular place. This suggests the need for forms of educational research and practice attentive and attuned to what it *feels like* to live in the rural, and to find oneself teaching in rural schools. Policy has never dealt well with this aspect of educational provision. At the same time, such a perspective is clearly insufficient in and of itself; to avoid romantic optimism, it needs to be brought together with, and integrated into, more conventional perspectives. The key point is that the rural needs to be understood flexibly, and as comprehensively, realistically, and manageably as possible. That attention to complexity has not always been the case, however, to the detriment of rural (teacher) education.

Halfacree’s (2006) work, as noted above, has been a crucial resource in developing the concept of ‘rural social space’—a construct bringing together particular notions of ‘social space’ and ‘rural space’. His emphasis on spatiality in geography has been particularly influential with regard to ‘rural space’, along with the work of Doreen Massey (2005) and Edward Soja (1996), as well as Henri Lefebvre (1991)—all representative of what Green and Letts (2007) describe as a ‘spatial turn’ in contemporary inquiry. As Halfacree (2006) writes: “Space does not somehow ‘just exist’, waiting passively to be discovered and mapped, but is something created in a whole series of forms and at a whole series of scales by social individuals” (p. 44). Indeed, it becomes necessary to rethink such terms as ‘space’ and ‘place’ more dynamically and relationally,¹ and Halfacree draws on the work of the French social theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991) to do this.²

Lefebvre (1991) highlights three ideas to re-think the idea of space: *spaces of representation, representations of space, and spatial practices*—‘perceived space’, ‘conceived space’, and ‘lived space’, respectively. These are all necessarily inter-related and, for Halfacree (2006), produce an “intrinsically dynamic”, “three-fold architecture”, as “a resource to be drawn upon by those in search of a better understanding of rural space in the world today” (p. 44). This is the conceptualisation we worked with in *TERRAnova*, as the affordances and benefits of thinking about the rural in a manner consistent with Lefebvre’s distinctive and highly influential ‘conceptual triad’ became clear. Noting that “all three facets together comprise rural space” (Halfacree, 2006, p. 51), Halfacree uses them to think about rural space in terms of ‘rural localities’, ‘formal representations of the rural’, and ‘everyday lives of the rural’.

This allowed us to see how rural space is understood as *real-and-imaginary*, in Soja’s (1996) evocative sense. Whereas the term ‘rural localities’ refers to how material space is perceived geographically (i.e. in terms of particular places and locations,

¹Regarding place, see White and Reid (2008); more generally, see Green (2013), and Green and Reid (2014).

²It should be noted that while Soja’s focus is more specifically with the city (i.e. the metropolis), Lefebvre maintained an interest in the rural, as a reference-point for his explorations of capital and space. See also, for example, Middleton (2012) on Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s work in remote rural schools in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand, where she uses Lefebvre to engage issues of place and space in educational history.

distributed across and within spatial fields and jurisdictions located outside metro-urban centres), the term ‘formal representations of the rural’ extends this. It refers to how the rural is conceived both *scientifically* (in terms of quantitative measures) in policy, historical, economic, and tourist descriptions, and *metaphorically* (as an image, idea, or icon) in culture, history, policy, and economics. Halfacree’s third term, interestingly, ‘everyday lives of the rural’, refers to *lived rural space*—rural space as it is *practised*, as a matter of everyday life. This was of central interest to us in the *TERRAnova* study as we examined how and why some rural places were successful in retaining teachers, and others not. We saw this as particularly useful in helping us to address the problem of why so many teachers sent to some places had not “come back” after their initial experience, to ensure a quality education for the children who lived there. Rural space in such a threefold view is a “hybrid”, comprising these “three intertwined aspects” (Halfacree, 2009, p. 455).

It is important to explain that, for both Lefebvre and Halfacree, this understanding of lived rural space is framed by capitalism, and is thus closely linked to notions of production and economy, and also power. This opens up an understanding of place(s) as necessarily, unavoidably *relative*—always located in relation to other places, and at varying scales. More and more in rural Australia, these relationships are global, rather than just local, or even national. Everyday life in individual rural places must be grasped in relation to “the totality of rural space” (Halfacree, 2006, p. 49), while each in its specificity is being separately produced in what he terms ‘contextual practice’. This idea usefully brings together notions of ‘context’ and ‘practice’ to understand how they interrelate and affect each other, in terms of *situated practice*, so that rural social space is understood as ‘practised place’.

Theoretically aligned to this is the term ‘social space’ drawn from Pierre Bourdieu (1999), who is concerned with the social field more generally. Here, social space is, in effect, a field of social forces, understood within Bourdieu’s theory of practice, built around the key concepts of habitus, field, and capital. Bourdieu sharply distinguishes between the notion of ‘social’ space and what he calls ‘geographical’ space (Painter, 2000, pp. 254–255). For Bourdieu, social space is essentially metaphorical, “to be understood heuristically, as a *space in thought*” (Painter, 2000, p. 254, emphasis added). We have worked critically and reflexively with this concept, expanding it to draw in the more explicitly geographical understandings and arguments outlined above, as we attempted to move towards a more generative view of social space for teacher education, along Bourdieuan lines. The rural social space model, as we have explained above, is a heuristic: another ‘space for thought’. It helps us understand why ideas such as a rural *habitus*, for example, and the sorts of social and cultural *capital* that have value outside of the metropolis are important to think about for all forms of (rural) professional education.

Bourdieu’s own interest in making matters of geography explicit can be seen in his exploration of the effects of location. Bourdieu works with notions of ‘site’ and ‘place’, or *lieu*, “in order to describe physical location as well as location in a more abstract social field of field of power” (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 134). He asks us to think ‘social’ and ‘physical’ location together: “social space translates into physical

space, but the translation is always more or less blurred” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 124). He describes the deficit thinking that results in the following way:

Because social space is inscribed at once in spatial structures and in the mental structures that are partly produced by the incorporation of these structures, space is one of the sites where power is asserted and exercised, and, no doubt in its subtlest form, as *symbolic violence* that goes unperceived as violence. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 126, emphasis added)

As an explanation of the “See you when you don’t come back!” incident described above, such work allows us to speak back to this subtle symbolic violence of deficit thinking, highlighting how, when, and why where one is located *matters*.

Space is never neutral. Location always has social meanings, and these are always multiple, mental and emotional, contradictory and even conflicting. Hence, our model of *rural social space* attempts to capture social space as a distinctive concept in the rural, drawing in notions of power and hierarchy, bringing together *rural space* and *social space* to help complexify the idea of rurality, or the rural condition. It aims to highlight the socio-spatiality of rural lives and should be used in teacher (or other professional) education as a heuristic with which new teachers can think about the nature of schools, students, and a teacher’s life in a particular place. Just as Mormont (1990) refers to the rural as “a category of thought” (p. 40), so too rural social space needs to be grasped as a strategic, purpose-built *concept*, specific to and originating from the need to rethink teacher education for rural and regional Australia.

Further, the RSS model extends this theoretical thinking through its explicit attention to the historicisation of these relationships. In its attempt to understand places as lived and practised, the model highlights the importance of *time* in all these deliberations. It is easy to understand how the social space of well-known rural places such as ‘Ballarat’, or ‘Broome’, or ‘Bathurst’ might be very different if one had lived there in 1788, 1888, and 1988, to use a time span that covers just the time since European settlers arrived to colonise the land. It is perhaps less easy to see how these communities would be different again, in the shorter time-scale of 2008 and 2018, *unless* one lives there still—and this is why our use of the model ‘to think with’ becomes important.

Working with Rural Social Space

The RSS model (Fig. 3.1) takes as its focus the social practices that have emerged as a result of the change and interplay of geography, demography, and economy, in particular rural places, over time.

In this section, we deconstruct the model to highlight the complexities it represents, highlighting also, of course, its limitations as a representation, and the need for critical interaction with each of its dimensions in order to move beyond a surface, and generalised understanding of rural social space.

Much common-sense thinking about rurality, still deeply fixed in the cultural imagination and shaping the expectations of many beginning teachers, is that it

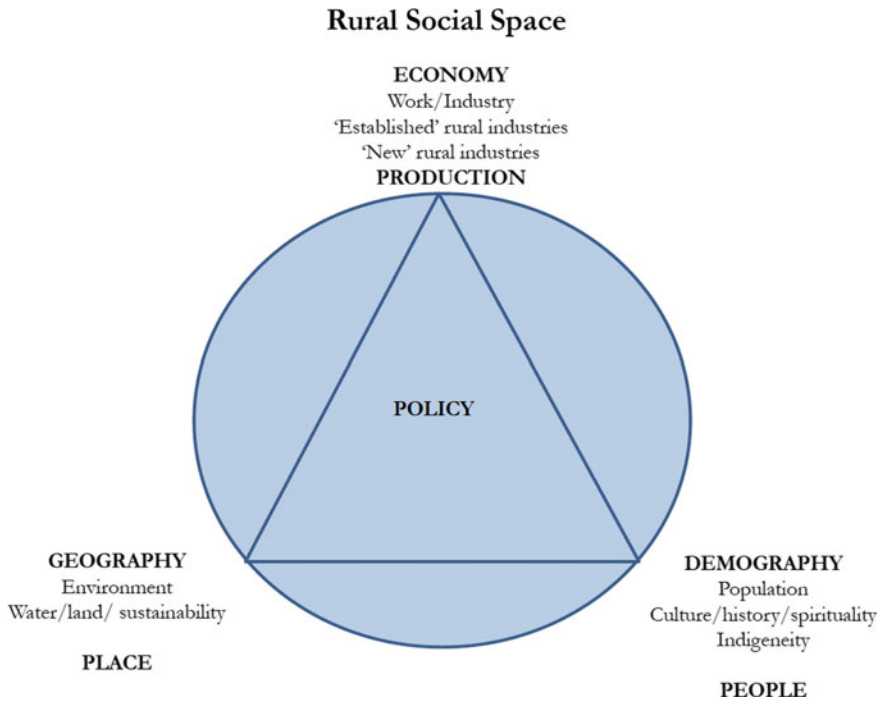
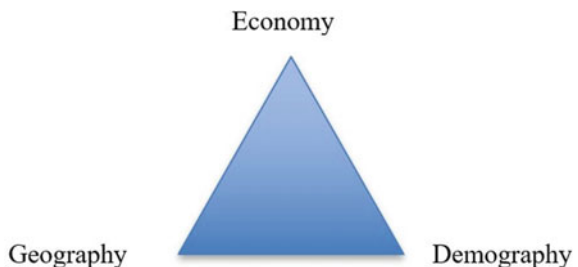


Fig. 3.1 Rural social space (Reid et al. 2010)

is largely to be understood in relation to the national *economy*, with reference to agriculture—to farming—whether that involves grains such as wheat and grazing (cattle, sheep, etc.). For this reason, we have placed ‘economy’ at the head of the pyramid of relationships characterising rural social space (Fig. 3.2).

But such thinking implies certain geographies (‘inland’) and demographics (‘farmers’). It is also intrinsically historical, and from the outset, particular. On the coastline, for instance, rural economies are clearly different, even when they do involve ‘farming’. And while farming has clearly been an important feature of the Australian economy, historically, there have always been other significant rural

Fig. 3.2 Pyramid of relationships characterising rural social space



(‘primary’) industries, particularly forestry and mining.³ More recently, however, with the declining or otherwise fluctuating fortunes of these traditional (‘old’) rural Australian industries, there has been a shift of attention to service industries such as tourism and recreation, which have clearly become increasingly important. These ‘new’ rural industries (already highly developed in coastal geographies) provide a basis for both employment and capital, in the context of what Halfacree (2006) describes as an emergent ‘post-productivist’ countryside, which is clearly a different country from one which produces only grain, cattle or sheep. The opportunity for any particular location to take up newer industries is not general, of course, and the effects of geography on what industries flourish or disappear, and what people work in them, are clear.

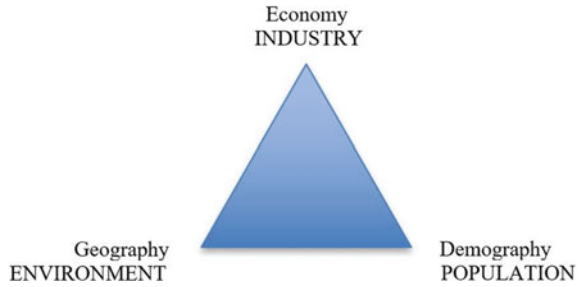
In *TERRAnova*’s Manjimup (WA) site-study, for instance, Lock (2012) notes how the development of the wine industry in other areas of the south–west has impacted on the town’s economy, extending the tourism associated with its historically key major industry—forestry. As tourist attention in the wine areas has grown, associated development has occurred in Manjimup, linked with the gourmet truffle industry. This has in turn brought additional tourism, and a different economic basis for the town beyond just the timber industry. Teachers in Manjimup reported that the lived experience of working in the school had similarly changed, with students seeing life-possibilities beyond those traditionally available to them in the township, and that as living there grew more diverse, it was increasingly easier for them to ‘stay’, rather than seeking to move to the city as soon as possible.

A focus on industry, or *economic*, variables is not the only consideration here, however, in thinking about the nature of the rural social space in any town. Just as important is due consideration of environmental sustainability. Questions of *geography* and *environment* must also be considered, therefore, and in particular what this means for inland Australia, which arguably has felt the fiercest and fullest brunt of climate change and environmental stress. Can we claim to ‘know’ the *geography* of a place, for instance: Does this remain constant over time, as climate and landscape change? How do changes in *economic* relationships alter over time—and perhaps various impacts on the landscape? Do economic conditions produce materially different life-experiences for people who live in a particular place? To what extent can we even know who these people might be? Do *demographic* relationships remain the same when populations change, constantly, certainly over time?

The closure of farms and the decline of rural communities are not simply because of the economy, important as that is, but because in some cases the land itself is no longer as supportive or as resilient as it was, certainly in many parts of inland Australia. Indeed, the industrial and the environmental aspects of rural social space, and its changing profile, are mutually bound up with each other, with many farmers increasingly taking a conservationist perspective in their work. The relational focus on economy, geography, and demography allows us to think in more complex ways about each of these, and what it might mean for being a teacher in relation to the

³Mention needs to be made here of fishing, as historically an important rural (non-metropolitan?) industry (although not so much a consideration in inland Australia).

Fig. 3.3 Complexified pyramid of relationships characterising rural social space



environment, the industry profile, and the people associated with the workforces in place there (Fig. 3.3).

Accordingly, a significant theme in *TERRAnova* was that of *sustainability*. This refers specifically to the sustainability of rural communities, and the role and significance of schooling in this regard. Schools are often quite crucial to the survival and flourishing of rural communities and small country towns—something that is documented very clearly in the literature (Alston & Kent, 2004). The larger concept here is *rural-regional sustainability*, bringing together rurality and bioregionality (Green & Reid, 2004; Green, 2016), and thereby further emphasising the significance of ecology and the environment.

An important issue in this context, though rarely engaged in rural education scholarship, is the concept of *amenity* (Argent et al., 2014). This has been described as a combination of “the relative attractiveness of the general environment in which [a particular locale] is set and ... more specifically, the qualities or facilities of the locale itself” (Argent et al., 2013, p. 306). This means that whether or not a particular place is attractive, from the point of view of prospective and practising teachers, depends to a significant degree on the quality of life there. What would it be like to *live* there, in that particular locale? What are its implications for lifestyle, in the here and now? This is in addition to its possibilities for career advancement and professional satisfaction over the long term. (It may well be, of course, that these two aspects are complementary.) This could involve accounting for age and generation, as well as expertise and experience, and thinking somewhat differently about mentoring and development. What are the life opportunities, in the largest sense, in living and working here? Amenity is therefore a further critical consideration.

We have tried to capture this relational overlay within the model. To illustrate its capacity to deal with the complexity of these relations, the *TERRAnova* study of West Wyalong is a good example. It reports the way that the *geographic* environment had been the original catalyst for economic and demographic changes in the town, when the expansion of a mine in the area had created the need for a highly educated management workforce on site. This new workforce sector brought their families with them, and these particular workers were not predisposed to sending their children away to metropolitan boarding schools, like the rural ‘squattocracy’. This meant, among other things, that the new influx of economically advantaged children brought new and different perspectives to the school, creating the opportunity

for local farmers, under financial pressure from drought, to keep their own children in the local school, and enabling the school leadership to enhance curriculum and cultural opportunities for all the students, on the basis of the expanded enrolments. At the same time, as the new mining families formed relationships with the school, environmentally concerned teachers were able, to some degree, to successfully lobby the mining company for compensatory environmental regeneration around the mine site and the township.

Finally, it is important to see rural social space in terms of the third aspect, namely the *demographic* characteristics and practices of the people living in different rural places. This can already be seen in the two site-study illustrations above; however, it is important to take a more general perspective on rural populations as well. Taking due account of rural people and places is clearly crucial. What can be said of the rural population? How is it comprised? What sub-populations exist within it? How is it distributed? Across what spatial fields? Are there particular patterns of density within it? If it is indeed the case that rural Australia is sparsely populated, overall, what demographic distinctions and discriminations can be observed nonetheless? Where are rural people located? What trends are to be observed in this regard? What changes? What about those places and their associated environments? These and other questions are matters pertaining to demography and geography, and their interrelationship.⁴

Matters of population composition and change, as well as distribution and density, and the effects on the quality of life in declining populations in rural Australia because of environmental and economic change, have long been a policy concern. Such concerns are the province of demography, as a field of study (Hugo, 2001, 2011). There are two significant issues that need to be taken into account here: the first is the need to understand and recognise the global relationships mentioned above and their impact on local social spaces. In line with demographic trends around the world, again as a result of environmental and economic instabilities and conflicts, there are increasing numbers of migrant and refugees moving into rural areas, for example, bringing economic advantages and cultural richness to the social spaces they are joining, as well as changed relationships and activities. There are also significant and volatile international markets that impact on the economic viability and impact of local industries, which they are often powerless to control.

The second is an essential consideration, with regard to education in particular. This is the need to consider the effects on rural social space of demographics that include a significant proportion of Aboriginal people. This is not because all Indigenous people live in the country, or inland—clearly that is not the case—although many do. In most Australian states, the most significant challenge for rural schools, teaching, and teacher education is the fact that many are characterised by considerable proportions of Indigenous students. In many of these places, in western NSW, or other remote locales, for instance, the evidence is that many newly graduated

⁴This is something that might be especially amenable to educational-cartographic investigation (Green & Reid, 2014).

teachers have been inadequately prepared to work in these contexts (Reid, 2017). As noted in the R(T)EP report:

[W]ith specific regard to the sociological profile of inland rural NSW, there is an increasing proportion of the population that identifies as Aboriginal. This presents schools and teachers, as well as teacher education and the public education system, with various challenges, both educationally and socially. It is unhelpful, and indeed counter-productive, to disengage rural education from Aboriginal education. (Green, 2008, p. 5)

Perhaps just as importantly, however, even if these teachers find themselves in circumstances where they are not teaching Indigenous students as such, it can still be argued that there is an important role to be played here with regard to the national reconciliation project, with rural Australia clearly continuing to play a historically significant role in shaping national and cultural identity. This is especially the case when it is recognised that rural schooling is largely associated with public education. In *TERRAnova*, the twenty rural towns across Australia whose schools were seen by the local people as successfully retaining teachers, as well as providing their children with a successful education (Reid et al., 2012a), were towns mostly characterised by what we saw as a general *absence* of Aboriginal people. Places where this was not true included highly multicultural towns like Lightning Ridge, in NSW, where cultural differences were played out across the whole community, and the rural social space had developed no clear ‘mainstream’. Schools in other research sites in the *TERRAnova* study had developed local relationships and resources that proactively supported Aboriginal students, focussing on them as ‘special cases’ to be managed.

The very disquieting finding that rural schools where teachers are successfully retained were predominantly schools *not* serving Aboriginal populations underlines the general racism and symbolic violence against Indigenous landowners characteristic of settler-nations around the world. It is therefore important that teacher education acknowledges and confronts the racism that characterises most Australian rural social space. The importance of taking an historical perspective when using the RSS model requires the usual silences (McKenna, 2018, p. 32) about the land and its settlement to be explored and filled. The Indigenous peoples who had custody of this land until white settlement did not consent to its appropriation and usage for non-traditional purposes, and neither did they sign treaties with the settlers, nor receive compensation. This underlying theft of country remains unresolved, and its effects are manifest across all relationships in the model. The power relations that Bourdieu highlights are played out in every (rural) place. What is important, though, is the subtlety of these dynamics, and the ways that power is exercised in the practices of the place. When the particular rural social space produced from the history of the interrelationships between the socio-environmental context and resources of any particular place, the people who have lived, and live there now, and the things and work they have done and now do, to live their lives in that place, is properly accounted for, power relations are thereby inscribed and embodied across all dimensions of the model—in and across the geography, the economy, and the population, and their interrelations.

Another way of looking at this threefold model of rural social space is to think of it in terms, firstly, of *people* and *place*, and their interrelationship, and secondly, of

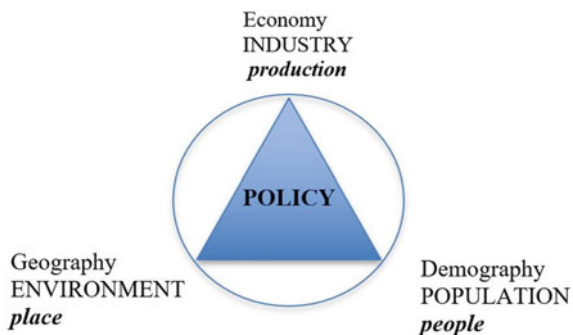
the rural economy, or the economic conditions of rural life, with the latter realised as production—all of which are overwritten by *policy* (Fig. 3.4).

Here, again, the historicity of policy is crucial. Time matters—and across the large range and diversity of rural social spaces that characterise ‘rural schooling’, there is a parallel range of pasts, presents (and possible futures). Hence, it is useful to think of rural social space in terms of the separate-and-related policy spheres of the *socioeconomic*, taking into account the perspectives and resources of rural society and economy, the *enviro-geographic*, and the *cultural-demographic*, with a particular bearing in this latter regard on Aboriginal people and their communities and constituencies. Further, this may entail broadening the ambit of concern from rural education, in and of itself, hitherto largely understood in terms of rural schooling, to encompass due consideration for matters associated more with environmental education, on the one hand, and on the other, Indigenous education—that is, a much larger, more inclusive curriculum remit. It also means that, rather than focusing on rural teaching and learning per se, there is value in attending more than has been the case to social-contextual considerations, which has implications for teacher education programmes in terms of context studies (‘foundations’).

To illustrate this point, we need only consider things such as political boundaries—for example, state borders. When these are noted on maps, we do not question their meaning—and the effects of the location of a particular place in Queensland, or New South Wales, or Victoria are not questioned either. However, as several of the *TERRAnova* site-studies demonstrated, colonial surveyors and settlers were largely ignorant of the meanings and significance of Indigenous cultures and histories and connections. In our study of Lightning Ridge (Reid et al., 2012a), for instance, we can see how the effects of what might be seen as an ‘understandable’ colonial ignorance have continued in post-colonial practices that, while problematic and inadequate, seem to be held fast by metro-centric policy that refuses what Roberts (2014) calls a ‘rural standpoint’.

A young teacher in Lightning Ridge spoke of the difficulty he had experienced in forming local friendships outside of his workplace. He had considered himself well prepared to take up a rural teaching position, as he was a keen sportsman, and had expected that he would be able to form community relationships through the

Fig. 3.4 Policy as it relates to the complexified pyramid of relationships characterising rural social space



‘tried and tested’ means of joining a local football club. But the state and regional borders drawn on the maps that govern his life and employment in NSW schools have actually overwritten long-established traditional Aboriginal language boundaries, kinship and relational ties, as well as geographical trading connections along rivers and Songlines. It is these traditions that determine the local sporting and cultural relationships: in Lightning Ridge, which is on traditional Gamilaraay country, the closest place to get a game is actually in St George, Queensland—where the school terms are different from NSW—making teachers unavailable for much of the season and unable therefore to commit fully to a team. Like people in St George, many Lightning Ridge locals see themselves as living on Kamilaroi country, not on the Wiradjuri or Barkandji country to the east and south, that is a more established policy reference for NSW schools. This is a specific and material instance of ‘practised place’, and it shows how understanding this deep and careful understanding of rural social space is important for the practices that support teachers to be retained in rural schools. It means that the integration of this teacher with the Aboriginal people in the town is made difficult. From that perspective, it becomes clear that what is at issue, once again, is a significant re-organisation of teacher education (and by implication, arguably, of professional education more generally), with specific regard to rural and regional Australia.

Conclusion

Our discussion above highlights the ways that social practice has overwritten geographical affordances and limitations—working with these to produce both economic and demographic conditions that are more or less conducive to the retention of teachers once they have experienced life in the place itself, and in the school. While there is nothing about any place that would a priori mean its school should be successful, there are always markers in its history pointing to this as possible, or even likely. Our case-study research across both these projects highlights the fact that, for schools to succeed in these terms, it has been the leadership practices of both school and community that produced the particular nature of a rural social space that allows teachers, students, and their families to flourish. On their own, each element of the model can be studied for any location that a pre-service teacher, school principal, social worker, law enforcement officer, doctor, or dentist may be considering as a workplace: its geography, its demography, and its economy. As we have argued here, however, quantitative measurement based on demographic and other social-analytic data must be enriched in order to ensure that Bourdieu’s reminder of the subtlety of power in relation to space is addressed. By asking users to think with, and about, constructions of rural space in both geographic and cultural terms, as well, the RSS model attempts to redress the symbolic violence attendant all too often to dominant views of rural places, and the education and social relationships experienced in them.

One final point: rural place is produced—it is *practised* rural social space.⁵ This suggests that a crucial aspect of the model (albeit undeveloped here) is a theory of practice. Bourdieu provides one such theory, as we have outlined. Much recent attention has been given to practice theory and philosophy, as a resource for teacher education and professional learning, including our own work (e.g. Green, 2009; Green & Hopwood, 2015; Reid, 2011). Hence, it must be seen as an *active* concept, emphasising agency, production, and investment. Producing rural place becomes a vital feature of informed, committed, ecosocially responsible professional education, *as practice*. Contextualisation and practice work together—for educational research as much as for (rural) teacher education. In its complex attention to the historic specificities and differences in the range of rural social spaces in which educational practice takes place, the RSS model provides a framework for moving this increasingly urgent project forward.

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⁵Conversely, social space is also produced in and through non-rural places and can similarly be understood in practice-theoretical terms.

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Chapter 4

Exploring the Interplay of the ‘Rural’ and ‘Community’ *in* and *for* Teacher Education Research



Simone White

Abstract This chapter explores the two concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘community’ to better understand how (if at all) rurality might interplay with and in turn shift the notion of community and vice versa in relation to education. Discussion centres on the impact and implications of this dialogic interplay in relation to teacher education. Both terms are often portrayed by the media as distinctively Australian with popular culture myths serving to feed idealistic, romantic views or views of the ‘other’ in the individual and collective psyche. The term ‘rural’ is as an example often viewed as a geographic term denoting a space and/or place that is beyond the metropolis and often defined as in-land. It is also a subjective term often dependent on one’s own lived experiences of places and spaces that ‘look or feel rural’. As an ‘imagined’ space, it can be viewed as either idealistic and romantic or barren and hellish. ‘Community’ is also a term that has been captured in the discursive turn to be often synonymous with ‘harmony’ or homogenous and collective efforts. Both terms risk being made redundant or meaningless within the teacher education field as they hold little substance and yet teacher education studies continually highlight and recommend the importance of engaging with and for a rural community. This chapter examines closely the terms, their meanings, and teases out further the implications for research in and for teacher education.

And this is no other
Place than where I am,
Here turning between
This word and the next. (W. S. Graham)

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Introduction

This chapter explores the concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘community’ and how they might be viewed both separately and together. The purpose is twofold: to better understand how (if at all) rurality might interplay with, and in turn shift, the notion of community (and vice versa) and to what extent this understanding might better inform the wider (teacher) education research community. We know from ongoing research that rural communities continue to suffer from more teacher shortages than their metro counterparts (see, for example, Kenny et al., 2016), but what can an exploration into the notions of rural and community offer to address this perpetual issue?

While the Australian government has recently called for beginning teachers to be ‘classroom ready’ (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014), is this the right focus for preparing teachers for rural schools? Indeed, for any schools? The work of the Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC, 2012) project highlighted the significance of being not only classroom ready, but school and importantly ‘community ready’ for rural settings. This notion has been recently taken up by Finnish scholar, Pasi Sahlberg who, now entering the Australian context, colloquially described the importance of teachers engaging ‘outside the school gate’ (*The Australian*, 30th of May 2019) and more formally in the recent Australian government review into rural, regional and remote education by John Halsey (2018) who notes the importance of: ‘Vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to Australia’s sustainability and prosperity—socially, economically and environmentally’ (p. 1).

It is within this backdrop that this chapter takes up the inquiry into the best ways to prepare teachers for diverse ‘rural communities’ or in theoretical terms, socio-spatial contexts, finding surprising synergies with urban-based teacher education research from the United States and that of a broader set of socio-cultural theorists exploring ‘othering’ and ‘third space’ (Soja, 1980, 1996). These theories have implications for all teacher education and professional learning providers.

Beyond the Metropolis, Beyond the Rural, Beyond Populism

Before exploring the theories further, it is important to discuss why a focus on the notions of rural and community is necessary and what this can offer the broader research community. In essence, I have been drawn to investigate further this interplay as a ‘situated practice’ drawing from the work of Green and Reid (2004) who note:

In our view, teacher education—like educational research as well as schooling itself—should always be understood as a *situated practice*. As such, it is best conceived as always located somewhere, socially, spatially and historically, and as always speaking from somewhere. (p. 255)

In framing the investigation into the interplay of the terms, I explore from three different perspectives, namely: beyond the metropolis; beyond the rural; and beyond

populism. I offer firstly a closer look at the perspective rationale for such framing before exploring further the social-spatial and historical theoretical tools the interplay uncovered.

Beyond the Metropolis

While a goal of this scholarly text might be an inclusive turn to the wider (teacher) education research community, importantly this type of examination work, firstly, contributes to a growing field of inquiry into the significance of ‘adding the rural’ (Green, 2013). Such endeavours builds on the collective work by education researchers (see, for example, Green, 2013; Green & Corbett, 2013; Roberts, 2014; White, 2015a; White & Corbett, 2014) keen to inquire into what impact the ‘rural’ adjective has to aspects such as teaching, education and research and; offers insights into the meanings of the two terms separately and together more specifically. Continuing this work is necessary as a body of knowledge work develops; it sharpens the understanding for those who live *beyond the metropolis*, for all.

The past two decades have witnessed a greater Australian research focus on the nuances of place in relation to understanding education and teacher education (see, for example, Brennan, 2005; Cuervo, 2012; Green, 2015; Halsey, 2006; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Reid et al., 2010; Roberts & Green, 2013; Somerville & Rennie, 2012; White & Reid, 2008). These studies have sought to examine rural education issues alongside the significance of understanding differences in place and space for beginning teachers and experienced teachers alike and they have shone a light on the evidence that adding the rural makes a difference—as it does to the notion of community.

One of the challenges we face as rural (teacher) education researchers is its perceived relevance within the wider research community itself. Rural research is often marginalised due to studies that are often smaller in nature, scale, and design. This text highlights an increased maturity from the field collectively to speak to a broader research base and also speaks to those who research beyond the metropolis.

Beyond the Rural

Turning next to the wider education research community, I have also focused on these two concepts in an effort to tease out what implications there might be for future research and practice more broadly, *beyond the rural*, as they themselves are an implication of this type of research inquiry. What implications might there be for the wider teacher education research community that a specific focus on rural and community might provide? This in essence contributes to the ‘so what?’ of the research we do. As begun in the collection of rural research stories (see White & Corbett, 2014), the question of ‘what is the good of the research we do’ (p. 3) has

propelled me to ensure the deliberations have meaning to those we seek to serve through our research. To further explain, a number of teacher education research projects point to the very recommendation that teachers need to be better prepared for 'rural communities' (see, for example, White & Kline, 2012). What theoretical tools can we use to do this from the position of pre-dominantly urban-based universities?

Studies have identified key links between the sustainability of rural communities and teacher preparation, finding that rural communities stand to benefit from teacher education curriculum that is inclusive of rural education needs (White & Reid, 2008). In earlier work (White, 2010), I argued that the relationships between rural schools and local communities are reciprocal, whereby success in the areas of rural leadership and community collaboration can in turn inform and impact positively on teacher education reform resulting in a reduction in staff turnover. Indeed, I have written about the importance of rural teacher educators also being 'community ready' and that they need to build teacher education from a rural standpoint (see White, 2015b). So what does this mean? What further inquiry is required beyond this broad statement and what comparisons might be drawn from the broader literature beyond the rural?

Beyond Populism

Thirdly, I have chosen to focus on the interplay between these two terms in rural research, in an attempt to caution against the very 'romanticism and humanism' that Green and Reid (2004, p. 33) speak of: what I have termed *beyond populism*. I am mindful in making the recommendation for teacher education to be community ready, that it might in some way unwittingly contribute to the very marginalisation approaches we, as rural researchers, seek to shift by being overly simplistic or as a motherhood statement. Both terms 'rural' and 'community' are often tied and portrayed by the media as distinctively 'Australian' with popular culture myths of the bush, mateship and comradery in the face of hardship, serving to feed idealistic, romantic or exotic notions of the rural as 'other' in the individual and collective psyche.

The term 'rural' is as an example often viewed as a geographic term denoting a space and/or place that is beyond the metropolis and often defined as inland. It is also a subjective term often dependent on one's own lived experiences of places and spaces that 'look or feel rural'. As an 'imagined' space, it can be viewed as either idealistic and romantic or barren and hellish (Sharplin, 2002). 'Community' is also a term that has been captured in the discursive turn to be often synonymous with 'harmony' or homogenous and collective efforts. As Corbett (2014), however, challenges, 'Community and its contemporary proxy 'place' no longer serve as innocent, authentic, experiential locations for educational practice' (p. 605).

If not interrogated, such recommendations of research for rural teachers to be community ready, given above, can become glib and lack relevance. As Green and Reid (2014) caution:

When place is evoked simply because it seems to affirm or defend un(der)-theorised notions of community and proximity, localism, or certain metaphysical values of presence and naturalness it becomes a problem. (p. 33)

To work against this 'problem', a closer examination into the recommendation to be (rural) *community ready* is made next.

Coming to 'Terms': 'Rural Community'

Rural is a term used to denote a geographic organisation and usually a term applied as a measure of distance of being away from a metropolitan place. In some cases, 'the rural' is a term used to differentiate 'spaces and places' as opposite to 'the city' or 'the urban'. As Pratt (1989) explained:

Just as there are 'urban areas', 'residential areas', 'suburban areas' and a host of other types of area, so too can we define 'rural areas' according to their socio-spatial characteristics. This way of defining the rural concentrates upon that which is observable and measurable and, hence, leads to descriptive definitions. Such empiricism accepts that the rural exists and concerns itself with the correct selection of parameters with which to define it. (cited in Halfacree, 1993, p. 23)

This differentiation of areas can be purely subjective and relational to where one is currently located.

In short, what is viewed as rural by one person might be viewed as outer-urban or even remote by another, and culturally such terms are viewed very differently within and across each state and territory. (White, 2019, p. 154)

Community, on the other hand, is a term often used to denote a social organisation. Drawing the two together helps further understand the relationship between geographical space and social space. As Bourdieu (1985) explains:

these two spaces never coincide completely, but a number of differences that are generally attributed to the effect of geographical space, e.g., the opposition between center and periphery, are the effect of distance in social space, i.e., the unequal distribution of the different kinds of capital in geographical space. (p. 743)

Often when people use the word, there is an implied sense of 'oneness', of belonging and of being together. As Williams (1985) states, community can be viewed as a 'warmly persuasive word' (p. 76). Increasingly, the notion of 'community' has been raised as problematic in that it can function 'ideologically as a gross simplification, obscuring how population clusters often comprise complex and diverse histories, cultures, languages, with different needs, aspirations, plights and powers' (Zipin et al., 2012, p. 180), in turn masking and homogenising both rural and non-rural communities alike. As Somerville and Rennie (2012) note, such terms need further exploration: 'It has long been understood in a wide variety of disciplines within the social sciences and humanities that 'community' is an over-used, ill-defined and contested term' (p. 194). As Corbett (2014) further raises the concern:

it has been observed that rural education scholarship has been hamstrung by its inability to escape both the metaphor and multiple encumbrances of community that invoke real or imagined rural solidarities to impede modernization and even education itself. (p. 604)

Rural, like community, evokes a particular imagery. As Donehower (2014) speaking from the United States perspectives notes:

Rural is typically a felt term in the USA, rather than a technical one. It is associated with small populations and isolating geography but also with conservative politics, an agricultural economy, ethnic homogeneity and an insular culture. For many in the USA, rural evokes an immediate chain of associations, often negative and frequently inaccurate. This complicates research on rural education, for we researchers must write against this backdrop. (p. 168)

Sometimes rural and community are conflated as one, *rural is the community and the community is the rural*. As Cormack (2013) explored in his study into teacher's ideas of 'the rural', they saw it synonymous with a 'small community'. As outlined in the study, a typical response was:

They are close knit and help each other through times... they are more personal with each other, instead of being a face just walking down the street. It is peaceful in their communities and a more relaxed atmosphere. (Excerpt, p. 117)

It appears from the growing research literature that by putting the two terms together, the sum of the parts could further erode their value as they both compound the accompanying issues and problems described above. Further clouding the issues, too often in the education literature, rural areas have been homogenised (Roberts & Green, 2013).

The recommendation of being (rural) community ready in relation to teacher education is potentially thus risky business for teacher education, inadvertently contributing to further 'distancing' those in rural places and washing away the very diversity that exists within any (rural) place. Interestingly, 'community ready' (see, for example, Zeichner, 2010) is a term also used by urban-based teacher education researchers. Urban in this definition, in this context, comes with its own set of assumptions, usually equating to low socioeconomic, high cultural and linguistically diverse populations, and high density living.

In terms of research into urban communities and the preparation of teachers, the importance of preparing for diverse learners is key (see Gonzalez et al., 2005). Urban teacher education literature discusses the importance of teacher preparation to cater for diverse cultures named, for example, as working class or 'poor', Latino, African American, American-Chinese and so forth. In the American context, often 'urban' is a term used to describe 'harder to staff' just like in many 'rural' communities in Australia. These places are perhaps harder to staff because the students and families are more likely to be from places least likely to be where teachers themselves grew up as they are in the Australian rural literature. In this way, 'these places' are in essence what is referred to by socio-cultural theorists as 'the other'.

To work against this positioning and to use the terms in ways to better understand the uniqueness of the rural, community or urban, particular socio-spatial tools can be employed. For example, 'place-based and place-consciousness' (Gruenewald,

2003), 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992) and other 'socio-spatial' (Soja, 1980) approaches have emerged as theoretical lenses into exploring the diversity of any one rural or urban community. Such tools can assist pre-service teachers to understand and recognise diversity and different perspectives within place. Many rural researchers have thus begun to explore notions of 'place' and 'space' to uncover and work against populist 'homogenous' and 'harmonious' notions.

In this way, rural communities can be viewed as a distinctive mix of geographical, historical, cultural and social organisation, or as Reid et al. (2010) describe a 'rural social space'. This particular framework was developed building from earlier work in the area (Green & Letts, 2007) and has sought to combine:

Quantitative measurement and definitions of rural space based on demographic and other social data with constructions of rurality in both geographic and cultural terms. (Reid et al., 2010, p. 263)

Likewise, theorists writing more from a city perspective such as Zipin et al. (2012) outline:

Communities are thus 'not thing-like products but living processes wherein socially interactive and communicative people [continually] (re)create things and practices, and invest them with sense and meaning'. (p. 324)

Such tools help understand the 'thisness' (Thomson, 2000) of any place. As Green and Reid (2014) emphasises, 'geography matters' (p. 26) and it is the ways in which a rural community is socially constructed and thus shaped by the confluence of many local and global forces that can be inquired into by teachers (pre-service, beginning, and experienced) and, importantly, researchers. In earlier discussion, it is noted:

Although rurality is not to be defined or delimited by geography, let alone determined by it, nonetheless geography is clearly an important consideration. This means among other things taking into account matters of distance and terrain, as well as location, or what might be better described as locational relativity, all of which have implications for and effects on educational access and equity. (Green & Letts, 2007, pp. 4–5)

To work against such 'condensing', attention now turns to a further discussion into the various spatial theoretical tools that rural researchers (and urban focused) are using in, with and for (rural) communities.

Exploring a Set of Spatial Theoretical Tools in, with and for: Rural Communities and Beyond

As Somerville and Rennie (2012) note, despite the spatial turn that has influenced social policy, research and scholarship, the new conceptual framework for understanding 'place' has been relatively absent until recently in research in education. This lack of socio-spatial awareness in relation to education has been steadily changing, however, with rural education research now often including terms to describe/define/interpret such as space, place, boundaries, edges, crossing, borders,

mapping and positionality. These words reflect research that is inherently ‘spatial’ in nature (Halfacree, 2006). As a consequence, specific spatial theoretical tools are emerging that (rural) researchers can best utilise. They are tools that can also serve to help work against seeing rural communities as homogenous or blanketed and rather as more nuanced as discussed earlier. Two particular tools: ‘Thirdspace’ and ‘Funds of Knowledge’, drawn from US urban-based theorists, are explored further.

Thirdspace

As an example, the notion of ‘Thirdspace’ drawing from the work of Bhabha’s (1994) cultural studies and Soja’s ‘othering’ (1996) framework is helpful here as it works to disrupt binaries and opens up a third and thus new possibility between. Zeichner (2010) applied this thinking in terms of (urban) teacher education and began to explore the in-between spaces and borderlands between the binaries of university-school, theory-practice and curriculum-professional experience. In his approach ‘community’ became the ‘third space’. Zeichner (2010) argued that:

third spaces involve a rejection of binaries such as practitioner and academic knowledge and theory and practice and involve the integration of what are often seen as competing discourses in new ways—an either/or perspective is transformed into a both/also point of view. (p. 92)

Thirdspace is a helpful socio-spatial tool if we begin to see universities and (rural) school communities as ‘porous entities’ and begin to think about the importance of ‘crossing boundaries’ and ‘creating seamless borders’ for teachers and researchers alike. Third spaces are the ‘in-between’ spaces or hybrid spaces that help create bridges between and across diverse and sometimes competing discourses. One reason that Thirdspace is often referred to in the literature as helpful in understanding social and geographical space is that it recognises diversity and strives to look beyond binaries to transformative opportunities. As Forgasz et al. (2017) explain:

The spatial metaphor of third space really encompasses a number of associations that powerfully and tangibly express the complex interrelationships between people, institutions and knowledges; for example we might speak of the centre and the periphery, the borders of knowledge, of marking out territory, exploring new frontiers, crossing boundaries and carving new spaces. The possibilities are seemingly endless. And yet third space is also more helpful metaphor for describing relationships and tensions. (p. 34)

By returning to Bhabha’s original use of third space in understanding different cultures, rural communities can be better understood through a socio-cultural lens. Valuing ‘community’ and ‘place’ thus becomes a way to counteract this issue in ‘situated’ ways that highlight the importance of local knowledges and diverse perspectives. As the work of Johnson et al. (2005) highlights, getting to know a place often involves seeing, and responding to the people in it, differently. Herein, the argument can become circular, as the critique of ‘community’ as irrelevant masks it from

the line of sight in teacher education. Zeichner as an example blames the lack of a 'community focus' on teacher education. He notes:

This lack of attention to communities and community field experiences in teacher education has been the case in both early entry and college recommending programs as well in many of the new hybrid teacher residency programs. (Zeichner, 2014)

More needs to be done to heighten the awareness of the relevance of community and place in (rural) teacher education. Kretchmar and Zeichner (2016) suggest that a transformation must occur in teacher preparation, arguing that education in solidarity with the community is key. As Gruenewald (2003) explains as a theory of place that is concerned with the quality of human–world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say. (p. 624)

Funds of Knowledge

Understanding the ways in which beginning teachers might view a 'rural community' is important as well as considering the divergence of the ways in which a beginning teacher might engage (or not) with the community from which students are drawn. The most promising and long-standing of the attempts to better connect schools to the outside school lives of children is the tradition of 'funds of knowledge' described as 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133).

This research has its roots in urban-based teacher education with Latino students; highlights the importance of preparing novice teachers for the particular 'place' in which they enter, work, learn, live and engage; and highlights the complexity of 'community readiness'. According to Moll et al. (1992), *all* households contain ample funds of knowledge that can be drawn upon and used as valuable teaching resources. Teachers can thus build from each household's broader social network and other resources and document students' interests, abilities and experiences beyond what is evident in the classroom to inform their teaching.

Zeichner et al. (2016) document a number of strategies for teachers to create opportunities where teachers can develop an understanding of students' families and communities' funds of knowledge to help them better serve and see their students. These include: home visits (Schlessman, 2012); community walk-about (Lauricella, 2005); neighbourhood walks led by families and community leaders (Henderson & Whipple, 2013); and 'listening sessions' where teachers and administrators listen to stories from families and students about desired educational environments. These types of strategies were employed and discussed in the Apple project (see White & Reid, 2008).

Community walk-about (Lauricella, 2005) as an example enables teachers to investigate their community and listen to a range of different perspectives. The community walk-about involves walking with community members to uncover local

practices, culture and traditions. The strategy emerged as a response to address what Mercado and Moll (1997) identified as some teachers who found it particularly difficult to look closely at what seemed at first glance a 'barren urban landscape and to see the wealth and the safe haven created in the midst of neglect or decay' (p. 34). Faced with this same issue, Lauricella's study examined different ways for student teachers to find out about a particular community. She trialled firstly, allowing student teachers the opportunity to visit places and to record their observations. These early trials, however, merely proved to reinforce many of the imagined or fantasised views the students held of these urban places of no hope or violence. Rural researchers (see Sharplin, 2002) warn of similar scenarios in visiting rural and remote places.

To address these concerns, Lauricella (2005) found that when activists for the community were identified and walked with the students, they provided valuable insights into the vast knowledges of the people, places and social networks. In this way, activists served as guides for the students and allowed an 'insider's view' to help students better understand and appreciate the communities and the cultures in which their teaching might take place. In this same way, initiatives whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders are positioned as key holders of Indigenous knowledges within places in the Australian context are key (see Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Rennie et al., 2018).

While this community walk-about approach was developed originally as an urban experience designed to expose predominately suburban pre-service teachers to aspects of city life, the same has been applied to our rural communities. The significance of Lauricella's (2005) work is that the activists were community members from diverse cultures and backgrounds to that of the student teachers. These same strategies are echoed (as an example) in the work of Pat Thomson's (2002) 'virtual schoolbags' and White and Reid (2008) as they discuss the issue and strategies of placing city-based teachers in a rural community. Here, they draw from the work of Gruenewald (2003) who raised awareness to the importance of 'place-based' and 'place-consciousness' pedagogies. While originally drawn from environmental literature, this theory has rung true to education researchers helping teachers understand that place matters. White and Reid (2008) describe it as:

Place-based pedagogies foreground the local and the known. They allow teachers to structure learning opportunities that are framed as meaningful and relevant to their students because they are connected to their own places, to people and to the popular cultures and concerns that engage them (Comber, Reid, and Nixon 2007). Place-conscious pedagogies are more interested in developing and projecting awareness outward toward places (Gruenewald 2003) beyond the immediate and the local, with a clear and articulated sense of the relationship of the local to the global, and of the social lifeworld to the natural environment. (p. 6)

Therefore, it is not simply a context in which rural education occurs, but a critical element of how education in rural communities takes place. By focusing on how space and place are constructed and impact rural education, the researcher and teacher are also able to understand and critique the forces that intentionally or unintentionally minimise, marginalise and condense rural areas and our understanding of them (Green & Reid, 2004).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the inquiry into the interplay between the terms 'rural' and 'community' offers three key messages for teacher education research. The first, a cautionary one that the recommendation to 'be community ready' as a conflation of terms, in particular for rural communities, could work to mask the very diversity and 'funds of knowledges' that exist in any place.

The second message is that teacher education research needs to draw out further from the socio-spatial theories such as 'third space' and 'funds of knowledge' to help beginning teachers see the ways in which a 'place' can be explored and understood to the benefit of all students. Both teacher education curriculum and professional experience can embed a community-based focus, whereby pre-service teachers are taught to examine any place through social-spatial lenses and widen their scope of focus to how the community and communities within are reflected within the school and classroom.

Finally, a third message is that synergies between rural and urban research offer the broader education research community opportunities to explore further methodological approaches, theories and cross-comparison studies to ensure all students thrive. Perhaps there is merit in further exploring a 'third space' approach to the very connections between urban and rural research for teacher education. What appears to bind the two fields of inquiry are that they involve places that are different to the lived experiences of most teachers and teacher educators. Herein lie a common landscape and the opportunity to explore strategies and approaches that can enact place-consciousness for our future teachers.

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Chapter 5

The Rural Community Walk: A Structured Learning Experience for Understanding Place



Jayne Downey

Abstract Simplistic or uni-dimensional descriptions of place are wholly inadequate to accurately represent the complex and nuanced composition of today's schools and the communities that surround them. This chapter describes a powerful process referred to as a Rural Community Walk (RCW) that was developed for undergraduate prospective teachers to explore, document, and grow in their understanding of the rich complexity of a rural school and community. The chapter summarises the theoretical and research bases for the RCW model and provides a set of recommendations for implementation by teacher educators, educational researchers, service organisations, and policy-makers who seek to develop a more nuanced picture of the places in which they are working and use this in-depth understanding to improve the outcomes of their efforts.

The Foot of the Farmer

"C'mon," my dad's voice would ring out across the farmyard, "let's go check the crops!" His call was an invitation to join him to walk through our family's fields, to observe the growth of the crops, noting areas of health and strength as well as identifying potential trouble spots that could damage the crop and impact the upcoming harvest. We would walk together to several spots in a field to examine the soil and its moisture levels, noting the current growth of the plants and searching for signs of insects, disease, or crop damage by other pests.

For hundreds of years, this regular inspection and assessment of the land, crops, machinery, fencing, and buildings have been considered sound agricultural practice and essential tasks on a farm. Previously, the only way for a farmer to do this was by walking through the yard and the fields to visually inspect the surroundings and discern the condition of the equipment and the health of the soil and crops. Today, farmers can view satellite images of their land with technology such as Google Earth, to examine general characteristics such as the size of the fields, the nature

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of the land, and past crop canopies. However, satellite images gathered from over 22,000 miles away have a high level of generalisation and this limits the amount of useful information available to the farmer. In some cases, images are obstructed or distorted by cloud cover, recorded on different days at different resolutions, and in some instances, are two to three years old. Thus, if an image of a field contains a white patch, it might not be immediately apparent if that white patch represents current salinity, clouds, or snow cover. And even if the farmer uses the zoom feature to get a closer look, there is a limit to the amount of detail that can be seen. The true nuance, character, and richness of the crops and the soil are missing from these distant satellite images.

To obtain a current and more detailed view, some farmers have turned to using multispectral remote sensing drones to provide near-infrared digital video images of land and crops in real time. While these aerial images can provide a more current overview of conditions, the data generated requires extensive translation and still cannot provide all the critical details needed for accurate decision-making. A farmer can use these images to develop general impressions and assumptions about current crops and the fields, but the only way to confirm or disconfirm those theories is by walking through the fields and gathering first-hand sights, smells, and experiential data. Thus, even with today's most cutting-edge technology, there is still no better way to develop a complete and accurate picture of what is really taking place with the soil and the crops than by walking the fields and experiencing current conditions first-hand.

My father spent a lifetime coming to really know his land and what was needed to produce a healthy crop. He invested time and energy to understand which crops would grow best in which soils and how different soils would perform under different conditions. Each year was slightly different than the one before. Each year he had to gather and interpret a vast amount of information; the variables of wind, soil, rain, seed, insects, weeds, crop diseases, fuel costs, chemicals, fertilisers, and equipment were all constantly changing over 60 years of farming. From season to season and year to year, he could not take for granted that assumptions based on previous years were correct for this new year. He used new tools whenever possible to collect some forms of data; but those lacked critical aspects of depth and richness. My dad needed to regularly walk through his fields to get the whole, detailed story. He needed to physically walk amongst the crops to understand and assess the conditions, the strengths, the assets, and the challenges, so that he could respond in meaningful and productive ways to produce the best crops possible under the local conditions. This was, and remains, the only way to fully understand the complex and nuanced composition of a farm and all the variables impacting its production. To date, there has been no replacement for the foot of the farmer on the ground.

Just as successful farmers work to fully understand their land by testing their assumptions and collecting good data to build accurate knowledge, so must those of us entering a new community—whether it be a new town, a new neighbourhood, or a new school—work intentionally to build accurate understandings of the nuanced realities of life specific to that place. This chapter outlines the development and implementation of a theoretically-based structured learning experience, referred to

as the Rural Community Walk (RCW), developed to address specific needs present in the preparation of prospective rural teachers (PRTs) in Montana, USA. The chapter summarises the theoretical and research bases for the RCW and provides a set of recommendations for implementation and adaptation across various types of rural and urban communities. The chapter concludes with recommendations for educational researchers as well as service organisations and policy-makers who seek to develop a more nuanced picture of the places in which they are working and use this in-depth understanding to improve the outcomes of their efforts.

Teacher Preparation and the Rural Context

Unlike most other professional preparation programmes, prospective teachers enter undergraduate teacher education coursework having spent 12 or more years in primary and secondary school settings, observing their K-12 teachers in action. This “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 61) has provided prospective teachers with multiple opportunities to construct their own ideas about the nature of teaching and learning. They have learned intuitively about the work of teaching, and thus, they tend to underestimate the complexities involved in the profession (Downey, 2008; Larabee, 2002). These naive assumptions about the nature of teaching can be problematic in teacher preparation coursework and field experiences because they may actually interfere with the learning of new concepts (Bransford et al., 2000) as pre-existing ideas can limit or impede what prospective teachers are willing and/or able to learn in their coursework (Lin et al., 1999).

Prospective teachers also tend to arrive in their preparation programmes with preconceived views about students, schools, and communities, from both urban (Lauricella, 2005) and rural places (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Sharplin, 2002). These ideas may have been formed in part by past experience, popular media narratives, and/or negative images “exploiting anecdotal tales of despair and hopelessness” (Lauricella, 2005, p. 123). However, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that well-designed teacher preparation experiences can contest negative stereotypes of urban and rural places as desolate, insular, provincial, etc. (Adams & Woods, 2015) and help to foster constructive understandings of the strengths, assets, and distinct funds of knowledge regarding place, context, independence, interdependence, and strengths possessed by family and community members across both urban and rural settings (Moll et al., 1992).

Experts suggest that learning experiences in teacher preparation programmes need to be viewed as “placed learning” (Eppley, 2015, p. 70), upholding the importance of geography, culture, social relationships, and local history, “not simply as a backdrop for teaching and learning, but as constitutive places that shape identities and possibilities” (Eppley, 2015, p. 70). Thus, teacher preparation for rural contexts needs to include learning experiences designed to foster learning about the strengths of rural communities (Reid et al., 2010), with field experiences, student teaching, and

coursework embedded in place, so that prospective teachers can be prepared for “*somewhere not just anywhere*” (Reagan et al., 2018; Dubel & Sobel, 2010).

Clearly, it is possible to make some broad characterisations about rural communities based on factors such as size of the community, proximity to urbanised areas, median household income, economic dependencies, and modal educational attainment (Coladarci 2007). However, similar to the views derived from Google Earth, these types of generalisations are likely to miss or obscure important details of various rural contexts. Use of a “placed learning” (Eppley, 2015, p. 70), approach provides RPTs with an opportunity to discover the unique set of social, economic, and environmental conditions, strengths, and assets that are distinct to a particular community (Reid et al., 2010) as well as the unique way in which each rural community uses those resources to address their local concerns (Theodori, 2003).

From this standpoint, rural is not defined solely on the basis of geographical or population parameters. Rather, the rural context is viewed as a complex and socially defined construct, articulated and embraced by the places and communities that consider themselves to be rural. Thus, learning experiences embedded in a programme preparing teachers for rural places must uniquely consider the important intersection of curriculum, context, and conveyance of all programme elements (Azano et al., 2019) with a special focus on developing PRT consciousness attuned to the nuances of the rural context.

Place-conscious teacher preparation can be a powerful support of teachers’ commitment to, and success in, rural classrooms (Azano & Stewart, 2015; White & Reid, 2008). For example, experts have recommended that teachers prepared with “an understanding of the links between the classroom, the school, and the wider rural community and their place across these three different contexts” (White & Kline, 2012, p. 40) may be more likely to remain in their position. However, while first-hand experiences of rural life may be an effective way to dispel some of PRTs’ misconceptions about rural living and teaching (Hudson & Hudson 2008), the provision of learning experiences embedded in place *alone* may not be enough to help PRTs build a rich and nuanced understanding of rural places and contexts.

Insights from Conceptual Change Theory

Previous research refers to the existing ideas, notions, or understandings that individuals possess prior to formal instruction as preconceptions (Posner et al., 1982). Preconceptions are tenacious ideas (Hewson, 1992) that individuals carry with them and they can be accurate or inaccurate. Either way, these preconceptions shape and inform understandings, actions, and interactions and exert a powerful influence on what individuals are willing to learn and what they accept as valid knowledge (Kagan, 1992). Research has shown that while some beliefs are explicit and easily recognised, others are tacit (or implicit). Tacit beliefs tend to be more difficult to identify and their influence on thinking and behaviour can be difficult to detect. Furthermore, if individuals are not consciously aware of their tacit assumptions and beliefs, they may

have difficulty adjusting them, even when presented with conflicting information (Kagan, 1992).

In order for individuals to move from inaccurate beliefs or preconceptions to more accurate conceptions (i.e. engage in conceptual change), they need to proceed through a process of knowledge modification that allows them to recognise, confront, and adjust their previous ideas to a new conception that is sufficient to explain a current situation or solve a current problem (Posner et al., 1982). Knowledge modification can occur through the complete *exchange of* one idea for another; through the *extension or enrichment* of current knowledge by adding new knowledge to existing understanding; or through *revision* of existing knowledge by changing key aspects of understanding to accommodate new information (Vosniadou, 1994).

Argyris and Schon (1974) suggested that individuals engage in superficial learning (referred to as “single-loop learning”) when they seek to solve problems by using solutions grounded in their existing frameworks of foundational values and beliefs. This is contrasted with meaningful learning (referred to as “double-loop learning”) which occurs when individuals discover solutions through critical examination and testing of their underlying foundational values and beliefs. This process can result in extensive changes in beliefs and strategies.

Preparing to engage in a rural school and community could be viewed as a complex and ill-structured task. Single-loop or superficial learning would occur when individuals use their existing beliefs to try to understand a situation. The outcome is often shaped by a psychological process commonly referred to as confirmation bias—the human tendency to notice or interpret information in a way that supports existing beliefs while at the same time ignoring or reinterpreting disconfirmatory evidence (Klayman, 1995). The research around confirmation bias reveals that preconceptions can act as a filter that accepts information that fits the individual’s existing mental model and rejects information which might cause cognitive disequilibrium (Bransford et al., 2000). Thus, PRTs, who engage in place-embedded learning experiences without guidance, may experience superficial learning and complete their experience by maintaining, rather than adjusting, their pre-existing knowledge and beliefs about rural communities.

However, double-loop or meaningful learning could be the result if PRTs are provided with guidance and opportunities to examine and adjust their foundational beliefs about the nature of rurality, rural schools, and rural communities. Research indicates that opportunities for fostering meaningful learning could include: guidance which explicitly presents information and experiences that blatantly contradict what PRTs believe (Sinatra & Pintrich, 2003); designing experiential learning for PRTs to explicitly connect educational theory with observed practice (Stevens & Richards, 1992); and providing PRTs with structured opportunities for guided experience, discussion, and analysis (Griffin, 1999). These recommendations all purposefully engage PRTs in direct experience accompanied by structured discussion and analysis that allows them to make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves rather than hearing or reading about the experiences of others. When these types of experiences involve high levels of activity, critical thinking, real-world relevance, social interaction, and low levels of perceived risk (Downey, 2008), they can be

highly effective in the work of clarifying understanding and building knowledge (Moon, 2004).

Principles of Practice from Community Development Professionals

A community has been formally defined as, “a place or location in which groups of people interact for mutual support” (Flora et al., 2016, p. 29). From this perspective, a community is a group of people who share some things in common such as living in a particular area, having similar experiences, or sharing some common interests. Individuals who engage in community development work provide leadership and research around how local people interact “to improve the overall quality of life of the community” (Flora et al., 2016, p. 433). The overall goal of community development efforts is to increase the community’s capacity to improve members’ health and well-being across the lifespan by addressing a wide variety of various community-relevant issues.

In order to achieve this goal, community development professionals in both rural and urban settings have established and refined various models to guide community growth and progress initiatives. Many of these models use a tool referred to as Asset Mapping. Grounded in the work of asset-based community development, this approach maintains that strengths and resources exist in all communities and that those elements can be identified, encouraged, and leveraged to advance the various aspirations of the community. Asset Mapping involves a carefully structured process of discovering and creating an inventory of the different strengths, assets, and resources present across all sectors (e.g. residents, businesses, organisations, and institutions) of the community (Flora et al., 2016). It can be used to promote the collective agency of the community members and allows the community to recognise the assets and resources available to bring to bear on larger issues and plans for the future (Flora et al., 2016).

The Rural Community Walk Context

Montana State University (MSU) has the distinction of serving as the land-grant university for the state of Montana. As such, our mission is to integrate education, creation of knowledge and art, and service to communities across our entire state (Montana State University, n.d.). The Teacher Education Program at MSU has recognised the importance of developing well-designed teacher preparation experiences to foster the development of the knowledge, skills, and understandings needed to be an effective PK-12 educator for today’s youth. We also recognise that in a state where 95.3% of our school districts are classified as rural (Showalter et al.,

2017), we have an obligation to prepare teachers for rural schools and communities by helping them develop a clear and accurate sense of rural place consciousness through coursework, first-hand field experiences, and student teaching placements designed to foster learning about the nature and strengths of rural communities (Reid et al., 2010). Furthermore, informed by conceptual change theory and principles of practice from community development professionals, we acknowledge that meaningful structure and guidance are key components in the process of helping PRTs recognise, confront, and adjust their pre-existing ideas about rural students, schools, and communities.

Thus, the Rural Community Walk (RCW) was designed as *embedded-in-place* learning experience specifically for the preparation of PRTs in Montana. The RCW integrates principles of place-conscious rural teacher preparation with the theoretical constructs from conceptual change literature and enacts these through the practices of Asset Mapping to help PRTs unpack their rural stereotypes, pre-existing beliefs and expectations, and develop a more accurate and nuanced understanding about the nature of rural schools and communities.

We sought to provide an opportunity for PRTs to develop accurate understandings of the nature of rurality and a rural context, and experience the various connections that can occur between a rural school and its community. The RCW aligns with research findings recommending that learning experiences for prospective teachers need to be immersive, “intentional, well-planned, and implemented with a critical lens” (Azano & Stewart, 2015, p. 2). Thus, the RCW model contains elements that allow PRTs to bring their pre-existing assumptions about rural schools and communities to awareness, engage in structured opportunities to gather a variety of distal and proximal data about a rural context, and through group discussion, reflection, and personal assessment, critically examine previous knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions in light of new information.

The intended short-term outcomes of the RCW process are for PRTs to: (1) make explicit their underlying assumptions and beliefs about a rural school and its community and (2) begin to develop accurate and nuanced understandings of “rural” and the connections between a rural school and its community. Long-term outcomes of the RCW are for PRTs in Montana to develop: (1) accurate and nuanced understandings of place and context and (2) capacity to build contextually relevant understandings of place and community in support of their future ability to live and thrive as a professional educator in any community.

The Rural Community Walk Implementation

The RCW is also grounded in the belief that every rural community is unique, and thus, there is no one simple narrative that can capture the full complexity of what it means to be rural. While some might seek to categorise all rural communities as hopeless, backward, or dying, others might counter by categorising the rural experience as the epitome of a peaceful and idyllic life. Given that neither of these

extremes accurately represents the complex and nuanced composition of rural places of life and learning, the RCW was designed with six key steps to provide opportunities for PRTs to interrogate their pre-existing assumptions and beliefs about what it means to live and work effectively in a rural setting and teach students who may be different than themselves. The six steps are:

1. Identify Your Guide
2. Identify Your Lenses
3. Explore Digital Representations of Rural Community
4. Form Personal Understandings of Rural Community
5. Draw Your Map
6. Draw Your Conclusions.

Step One: Identify Your Guide

The key to a successful RCW is to identify a knowledgeable community member to accompany the group on a physical walk through the community as a guide, informant, and interpreter for the experience. The importance of having a community guide cannot be overstated. This person serves as a catalyst for the whole experience for, without their shared insight and wisdom, participants in a RCW may not be able to perceive or understand the totality of what they are seeing. The RCW guide is more than an edu-tour operator; the RCW guide is a person who knows the history of the community, can tell its stories, explain the connections, and as an interpreter, provide important insider information. Like the farmer who has walked their fields for a lifetime, an effective RCW guide is someone who has come to really know the community landscape, loves the place where they live, and can share that passion for their rural community with others.

Previous research found that exploring a community without guidance could, in some cases, serve to perpetuate simplistic narratives and reify pre-existing negative beliefs (Lauricella, 2005). However, an effective RCW guide is able to offer insights and share a powerful sense of history that can communicate the sometimes unseen, evolving nature of a place and the hope of a community (Lauricella, 2005).

Step Two: Identify Your Lenses

Across various aspects of life, the lenses we use to view situations can alter what is seen and not seen. Certain lenses can help to bring things into clear focus, while other lenses can obstruct or distort our view. When getting to know rural communities, an individual's pre-existing beliefs and assumptions can serve as powerful lenses or filters to shape what is seen and understood. For example, a passer-by might describe a distant rural community as being, "in the middle of nowhere", suggesting that its geographical location is a dominating disadvantage. However, for someone

whose life is deeply connected to that rural place, that rural place is not *nowhere*; rather, it is an important *somewhere* and that somewhere plays a pivotal role in their identity, history, family, or other aspects central to their life. So, this begs the question: How can two people look at the same place and context and reach such different conclusions? How can two people view the same rural community and one say, “There’s nothing there!” while the other exclaims, “This place is filled with resources!”? This mystery of human perception reveals the impact of pre-existing beliefs and assumptions to shape what individuals are able to see as well as what they fail to see. In this light, certain assumptions about geography or culture could obstruct the opportunity to see all the strengths and assets the community has to offer.

In order to recognise, confront, and possibly adjust pre-existing beliefs and assumptions, participants in a RCW are invited to adopt an inquiry stance, where teachers work together in community to generate new understandings through “conversation and other forms of collaborative analysis and interpretation” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 53). Starting with this stance, participants respond to two sets of questions. Responses to the first set of questions help to bring to awareness some of the pre-existing notions, ideas, understandings, beliefs, and assumptions. Example questions could include:

- What does rural mean to you?
- What comes to mind when you think of the idea of rural?
- How do you describe a rural community?
- What are your current ideas about rural schools and communities?
- How do you feel about rural schools and communities?

As participants share, review, and discuss their responses, the group can be listening for indicators of deficit narratives. Examples that have been shared in our RCWs are descriptors such as problems, backward, out-of-date, old fashioned, middle of nowhere, out-of-touch, or traditional. However, the group needs to also be listening for indicators of constructive narratives. Examples that have been shared in our RCWs are descriptors such as possibility, resilience, resourceful, advantage, hope, adaptive, responsive, innovation, agile, or nimble.

The second set of questions are formulated by each individual regarding their personal areas of interest and questions that they want to explore as part of the RCW process. Key to forming this set of questions is to frame aspects of their inquiry that they can discuss with rural community members from various sectors such as school board members, community leaders, business leaders, parents, students, or community elders.

Step Three: Explore Digital Representations of Rural Community

In keeping with the example of the farmer who uses digital tools to support a growing understanding of their land and crops, RCW participants can learn a lot of valuable information about a rural community through digital tools and databases. In our work, RCW participants are invited to explore Google Earth for an overview of the physical space as well as online databases and records to understand some of the history and current social features of the place such as crime, census, housing data, or academic achievement. Websites can provide listings of available resources and institutions and help participants identify aspects of the community they would like to visit during the upcoming *windshield survey* (i.e. preliminary drive around the community) as well as the RCW. Exploration of the digital representations of the community can provide a preliminary sense of the community and data to support or challenge the assumptions identified during step two.

Step Four: Develop Personal Understandings of Rural Community

The example of the farmer who has spent a lifetime coming to really know their land and what was needed to produce a healthy crop demonstrates that there is no replacement for the foot of the farmer on the ground. So too with the RCW, steps one through three become a worthwhile investment when they are accompanied by the windshield survey which involves a preliminary drive around the community, then followed by the actual walk through the whole community. Digital tools can provide some useful information, but they are no replacement for the understanding and insight possible from first-hand observation and interpretation shared by the RCW guide.

The actual walk through the community can take a few hours. It is during this time that your guide will share stories and insights and participants will ask their questions connected to their points of inquiry. Encourage participants to note several different types of community strengths and assets during the walk.

The following categories can help to organise participants' observations, questions, and notes about *location* and *condition* of:

1. Organisations—churches, associations, non-profits, libraries, government, fire, and police
2. Health care—medical, dental, and mental health
3. Education—schools, county extension offices, and higher education
4. Cultural—art centre, community theatre, museums, sports facilities, newspapers, radio, and community directories
5. Business—bookstore, barbershop, hair salon, coffee shops, restaurants, grocery, and retail

6. Environment and infrastructure—roads, bridges, streetlights, sidewalks, water, public spaces, parks and recreation, community gardens, and bike paths
7. Physical Assets—housing, land, buildings, transportation, and facilities
8. Economic Assets—what residents produce and consume in the community
9. Local Residents—members, community elders, families, skills, experiences, capacities, passions, and contributions
10. Stories—important vignettes of community life and history.

Step Five: Draw Your Map

After gathering information from the conversations and notes from steps three and four, as well as the answers to the questions formulated in step two, participants construct a map that captures the key points learned during the RCW process. A rural community map can serve as graphic representation of what each participant learned about the rural community, its geographic boundaries, and its strengths and assets.

In our experience with the RCW, the process of Asset Mapping is a central feature of the structured learning experience. We found this to be a useful tool to introduce PRTs to the importance of rural place and foster a deep sense of place consciousness that will be critical to their long-term professional and personal success as a rural educator. Asset Mapping is a practical way to introduce PRTs to what it means to begin to know a place and understand the context. Through the RCW, RPTs were also able to learn a set of skills that will help them to increase their awareness of local resources, recognise and value those resources, and consider ways those resources could one day be used to support learning in their school and classroom.

Step Six: Draw Your Conclusions

The final step in the RCW process is to ask participants to re-visit their responses to the first set of questions in step one and use findings from their inquiry to examine and challenge pre-existing assumptions. Professional reflection and analysis can be a key component in the knowledge consolidation process as it supports the strengthening of new insights and new understandings. One approach to support productive professional reflection using the inquiry stance is a core thinking routine known as: *I used to think ... and now I think ...* This core thinking routine was first developed by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Harvard, n.d.). It can be helpful to identify which ideas have been *exchanged* for new ideas; which of the previous ideas have been *extended* or *enriched* by adding new knowledge to existing understanding; or which of the previous ideas have been completely *revised* due to participation in the RCW process. These new understandings can be discussed and shared with the whole group to complete the RCW process.

Recommendations for Using the RCW Model to Build Accurate Understandings of Place

We have found through several iterations of the RCW that this model can be a powerful learning experience for RPTs to identify, document, and understand some of their pre-existing ideas, conceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and “undeveloped notions about rural living and teaching” (Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p. 74). Through a carefully designed and structured set of experiences, reflection, and discussion, this process has allowed RPTs to build a more accurate understanding of the visible and invisible strengths and assets of a rural school and community.

However, we also believe there are several ways in which the RCW model could be a powerful tool for educational researchers, service providers, and policy-makers who seek to develop more nuanced pictures of the places in which they are working and use this in-depth understanding to improve the outcomes of their efforts. In recent years, we have witnessed many well-intended efforts to conduct educational research and/or provide service for communities. Yet, upon review, we have also observed significant variation in the relevance and meaningfulness of the outcomes of these efforts. Based on our work with the RCW, we would argue that one of the most important keys to successful research and service is the care taken to fully understand the place and its people before designing and implementing the research and/or service. Just as successful farmers invest time to fully understand the capacity and challenges of their land by testing their assumptions and collecting good data to build accurate knowledge, so can those of us teaching, researching, or serving in communities use principles from the RCW model to build understandings attuned to the distinct realities of life specific to that place. Thus, in keeping with the RCW’s steps by which to identify and test our assumptions about a place, we offer the following recommendations for educational researchers, service providers, and policy-makers who seek to increase the meaningfulness and relevance of their work. As early as possible in your research, service, or policy initiative:

1. **Identify** a local guide who will be able to introduce you to the community and provide the insight and wisdom you need to be able to perceive and construct an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the place.
2. **Invest** time to identify and articulate your pre-existing notions, ideas, understandings, beliefs, and assumptions about the place and its strengths, assets, and challenges.
3. **Explore** various digital representations of the place (such as Google Earth, online databases, and online records) to identify various resources, institutions, and features of the place you would like to visit during the windshield survey and community walk. Note the aspects of your exploration that surprise you.
4. **Engage** in the windshield survey and community walk with your guide. This is an important time to ask questions and critically interrogate your own pre-existing ideas and assumptions about this place and its people.
5. **Draw** a map with notations that graphically represents your new understandings regarding this place and its people.

6. **Articulate** the insights and conclusions you gained through this effort and consider how you will use them to shape, inform, and improve your research, service, or policy initiative.

Conclusion

The model of the RCW elevates the importance of practising cultural humility—“an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused, characterised by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual’s cultural background and experience” (Hook et al., 2013, p. 353). Thus, the RCW model provides an approach that can be employed across contexts by teacher educators, educational researchers, service providers, and policy-makers to embrace cultural humility as a standpoint, recognising the natural tendency to view one’s own perspective and worldview as superior, and instead express respect for, and actively seek to understand, the worldview, context, and place of another (Hook et al., 2013).

A key to successful practice we have learned from developing the RCW is this: you have to *know* a rural place to do good work in a rural place. For non-rural teachers, researchers, and service providers, this means that, *context matters* and if you do not accurately understand the context of a community, you will be limited in your ability to successfully meet the true needs of that place. An investment of focused time and energy is necessary to *understand* a place, to *appreciate* a place and to really *know* a place.

There is NO replacement for the foot of the farmer on the ground.

There can be serious negative implications when naïve understandings are employed by those seeking to conduct research or provide services in new communities and locales. The RCW model is a trustworthy approach by which an educational researcher can productively invest time and energy to support the construction of insight and awareness and develop a more accurate understanding of the multiple realities of a community’s life-ways. The RCW model provides a structured approach to first-hand experiences that can confirm some previous understandings, provide new insights, help to foster positive attitudinal changes, and dispel some inaccurate assumptions about life and work of a place and its people.

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Chapter 6

Using Rural Frameworks and Research to Develop Understandings of Educational Justice and Equity Across Socio-Spatial Settings



Dennis Beach and Elisabet Öhrn

Abstract During industrialisation, production industries tended to become increasingly concentrated with this stimulating urbanisation and the growth of cities with high population density. These environments became understood as the norm for capitalist production economies. Consequently, the schools in them also became a primary focus for educational research and policy, which particularly in the sociology of education, became caught up in the dynamics of urban problems. Education sociology became an urban subject and an urban normalisation developed that has tended to hide other important markers of educational relations and disfigure scientific understanding on the basis of a so-called research and policy metrocentricity. This chapter begins with a consideration of urban education research and its understandings of marginalisation, poverty, and social fragmentation as *urban* issues. It then explores how analysis frameworks used in rural education research can add to this knowledge, in particular social structures as social class across socio-spatial settings.

Introduction: Researching Education Justice and Equity as Urban or Generic

Urban intensive schools are found in large metropolitan cities, usually of half a million people or more, and in Sweden there are only really three of these: Gothenburg, Malmö, and Stockholm though Malmö actually falls short in terms of population as it is under 500,000. Most urban schools are of another kind. They are found in smaller urban areas and urban emergent areas. They are usually considered in research and national educational policies as not typically experiencing the magnitude of the

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variations in population density and type typical of urban intensive cities, and the schools are not understood as having the same kinds of social problems.

In this chapter, we use experiences, theories, and concepts from a recently completed research project on rural youth—education, place, and participation (VR 2013-2142, funded by the Swedish Research Council 2014–2017), to discuss what might be understood as spatially specific education relations. The project took as a starting point our earlier, primarily urban educational research, but was conducted in relation to aspects of educational justice and equity in six different rural area schools (Beach et al., 2018, 2019; Öhrn & Beach, 2019). The research involved 340 hours of classroom observations as well as field conversations and formal interviews with pupils (68 boys and 68 girls) and staff at the schools, supplemented with observations in the local neighbourhoods and document, social network, and media analyses. The project included schools in sparsely populated areas, remote villages, and small industrial and de-industrialised towns, and thus responded to what we and other researchers have identified as a neglect of rural problematics in education research and policy (Öhrn & Weiner, 2007) and the plural forms of capital that exist there, beyond just economic capital (Roberts & Green, 2013). Rural places are spaces that are full of people, practices, objects, and representations. There is value in considering their distinctive subjectivities and particularities and the ways they will often carry meaning that is socially ascribed and inscribed as both objectively real and imagined (Roberts & Green, 2013).

Researching Rurality to Rethink Structural Educational Injustice

The focus on urban matters and contexts in education research has given rise to a rich flora of studies in, and knowledge about, education, and social relations in urban places and a lack of corresponding studies on rural areas. This represents an aspect of a silencing of rural conditions and social relations that also hampers the theoretical understandings of socio-spatial dimensions, and their global and local conditions more generally (Beach et al., 2018, 2019; Roberts & Green, 2013). This extended and deepened focus on space, place, and social justice is a central feature of analysis in several of the chapters in the present book, including the present one.

Urban education research is, as stated earlier, typically concerned with social problems such as disadvantage, poverty, and marginalisation, which it also tends to locate to particular urban spaces (Öhrn, 2012). This is highly problematic as it confuses the central question of what might pose as distinctly urban educational issues and what might be more generic ones (c.f. Campbell & Whitty, 2007). It also tends to treat rural spaces as if they were of one type that simply represents an absence of (or antithesis to) urban contexts (Corbett, 2015; Bagley & Hillyard, 2014) and reduce the notion of urban as applying to all urban contexts, which are treated as the same, when of course they most definitely are not. The theme of the present

book, and also Roberts and Green's (2013) understanding of the need to broaden the social justice agenda in education research and to include more plural forms of capital, is of significance here.

Rural and urban contexts differ from each other and within each category, too. But at the same time, there are still some clear and consistent patterns in the development of rural areas and the schools in them (Beach et al., 2019). One of the consistencies at present in Sweden is rural shrinkage and how private investments currently push cities (and the number of schools and school places there) to grow. Almost half of the country's rural municipalities have smaller populations today than compared to three decades ago, have schools that are closing and pupils that are travelling more hours and longer distances to obtain their chosen education—which they also do with greater costs than before and with less State compensation (Cedering, 2012; Fjellman et al., 2018; Östh et al., 2013; SOU 2017:1).

There are a number of dimensions involved in this according to our research. One of them derives from the reluctance of private suppliers to invest in education in poor and geographically less accessible areas (Fjellman et al., 2018; Forsberg, 1998; Östh et al., 2013). A type of choice unevenness develops from this as calculations of the chance of economic returns are central to market investment/ors and they are deemed less likely, more costly, or more difficult in these regions. It means that education choices are present for others and in other places, but not in many rural or in multi-cultural, ethnically complex, and, also often today, territorially stigmatised areas (Beach, 2017, 2018).

These points about important differences and the ways new policies refract because of them were also picked up in a National Commission report recently on rural areas in Sweden (SOU 2017:1). This report also pointed to the significance of class and other differences (such as access to forms of valuable social and cultural capital) within and between rural regions. The point was, that although differences in terms of access and performance widen in general between rural spaces and urban areas, on average, at each stage of the education system, perhaps the distinctions and differences between rural areas—in terms of location and type, and even within them in terms of social composition, power and gender relations, and social and cultural capital—may be even more important (Roberts & Green, 2013).

Massey (1994/2013) has emphasised the importance of spatial characteristics of these kinds for the development of social identities, senses of well-being, and levels and types of social integration in geographic spaces. They were also noted in the national power and democracy commission inquiry in Sweden already thirty years ago (SOU 1990:44). Different social groups in different places have different relationships to the local place (Beach et al., 2018, 2019), and there are both class and gender dimensions that appear in terms of the education opportunities experienced by pupils, the choices they are able to (and do) make, and educational outcomes. Issues of social class can represent 'a long-overlooked part in rural life' (Howley & Howley, 2014, p. ix). And finally, as for instance Massey (1994/2013) points out, though often for some reason ignored, the presence, intensity, and outcomes from capitalist production relations in a place have very important consequences for

the local historical and gendered division of labour and all other subsequent social relationships.

Places and Their Historical and Contemporary Production Relations

Through our research project's inclusion of different regions and schools, we could identify important spatial differences not just within, but also between different areas pertaining to relationships concerning economic and social development on the one hand, and three levels of educational policy and practice on the other. These levels are those of (a) educational policy formulation (official ideologies and their foundations), (b) educational/pedagogical recontextualisation (the incorporation and negotiation of institutional rules of practice) and (c) the enactment and interpellation (of educational practices, interactions, and learning). The organisation of material production was important to these relations, as the foundations of production in an area had knock-on effects in terms of: cultural reproduction, social hierarchisation, the institutionalisation of educational opportunities, and realisation and the formation of individual(s') educational choices and commitments (Haley, 2017). Put simply, economic production had become manifest in deeply different ways in the different areas, and this had, in its turn, produced massively different socio-geographic reorganisations of the areas and visible differences in the three levels educational policy and practice (Beach et al., 2019).

In some of the areas for instance, there were very distinct pockets of semi-urban industrialisation and settlement. Some of these were now also suffering from de-industrialisation and the loss of security due to the removal of work opportunities and the withdrawal of the social contract between capital and labour, whilst other areas had been left more or less untouched by commodifications of rural space. These areas had remained seemingly relatively geographically unchanged over decades, with this then creating differences also in terms of centrifugal and centripetal forces (in terms of both kinds, causes and dimensions) (Cedering, 2012; Haley, 2017). Some areas had become intensively industrialised, with this drawing in a migrant labour force and creating secondary spatial developments. The high demand for labour created a need for the in-migration of an industrial workforce (which may come from other rural areas) and demands for accommodation to house this new labour power if commuting was not possible. Subsequently, other businesses such as construction, retail, and service followed, along with demands for social institutions like schools, health, and recreation centres, which were sustained whilst labour intensive production remained. If it did not, then often local economic and population recession took over, along with a fall in the intensity of local institutions and services. Finally, in areas where there had been a population without an intensive production industry other (what we have termed none-/low-commodified) spatial conditions existed.

These ideas correspond with writing by Lefebvre (1974/2000). He suggested that the greatest events of the last few decades are the effects of industrialisation on capitalist society in the programming of everyday life as well as the expansion and effects of urbanism into and in rural areas. Whilst these rural areas also saw advances of technology, and the industrialisation of farming and forestry had contributed to re-sculpt rural life and its social relations and practices, these effects were mild and moderate compared to the parallel developments in urban(istic) areas and State planning. As Lefebvre (2000) suggested, (industrial State) capitalism had increasingly organised working life, but it had also greatly expanded its control over private life, education relations and possibilities, and leisure too, through its political organisations of space and spatial relations (Corbett, 2015; Roberts & Green, 2013). Our research confirms this and gives examples.

We consider these emergent patterns to be highly important ones analytically. Capitalist dependency and the now globalised commodification of labour have been internationally described as usually historically leading to an exodus from rural regions (c.f. Brox, 2006). However, it does not always do this. On the contrary, rural regions can also attract through their labour opportunities. As is seen in international research, well-paid blue-collar work in rural areas on a seasonal or permanent basis can reduce the need to move to get an education (Forsey, 2015; Hughes, 2016; Lyson, 2006; Pini & Leach, 2016). Our research also points to this. Common comments among informants in our own research included: ‘What do I need to move for? I don’t need a big education? They have what I need here’. Point for point:

- Staying put was generally most strongly influenced by the possibility of income security and being able to make a living.
- In the actively economically productive rural industrialised towns this was strongly the case for young working-class people.

Thus, there were differences between types of rural areas in relation to the way education developed and related to the community. However, there were also individual differences in terms of how education was recognised as being of value, even though there was also a sense of a general pattern. The general pattern was that the availability of well-reimbursed, commodified labour was able to both keep people in a place they had grown up in and also draw in others on the basis of a recognition of possibilities for developing a positive subject identity as *homo-consumericus*—a consumerist person consummate with Fromm’s (1997) *Homo Consumens* as a subject who has become overly, and almost unthinkingly, accommodated to a commercialised and acquisitive social order.

These were not the only reasons for a population being in a place and they did not necessarily work for as a prime motivator for all individuals. Other things that featured in the data were that people saw a place as attractive in other ways, such as it gave them great recreational possibilities on their own doorstep. This worked as long as it was not countermanded by a stronger driving factor from home and school ‘to get out to get an education you can’t get here and make something valuable from it for yourself’. A third influence was in terms of a negative discourse in relation to places to move to—i.e. people would talk about staying in relation to other places

not being any better or indeed even being worse. For instance, as one informant put it, ‘you could move to x-town, but it is very noisy and dirty’.

There were thus opposing forces. On the one hand, there were strong associations with labour, the need to make a living, and possibilities of developing a positive identity, pulling or pushing individuals to some areas. On the other hand, working to keep people in place, sometimes was a strong negative discourse of urbanism that reduced the propensity to leave for labour opportunities. Finally, there was a recognition of other value forms in rural spaces to the economic exchange value brought through the presence of commodified labour opportunities. This was apparent for young people who wanted to stay even though it would be difficult to make a living, as they put it. But it was also apparent in relation to free-locating migrants. Some came, for instance, ‘for the quality of life’ as one participant put it; some came ‘to set up a local business’ that in some (usually small-scale) fashion commodified elements of country-living through activities like environmental farming, tourism, and sport and recreation, which were among the examples noted in the areas we visited. These free-locators were particularly valued in areas (and in rural policy) for introducing and/or attracting capital and even, in some cases, creating local labour opportunities.

The relationship between the town and the countryside is thus a historical one with the mediating role being played by industrialisation. The advance of technology is important too, of course (Lefebvre, 1974/2000). It is through technology that industrial society has been supplanted by urban society. The production of the city has become the end, the objective, and the meaning of industrial production whilst the development of rural spaces has become marginal (Elden, 2007).

School Presentations of Place and Values in the Age of Marketisation

Education push and pull forces need then to be understood in relation to the complex historical and cultural conditions and forces that can develop and operate on different subjects in these different conditions. This is really repeating lessons from a century of Marxist research on education and economic development from *The German Ideology* by Karl Marx onwards (Marx & Engels, 1932). It recognises that human beings in complex societies produce their means of subsistence in order to satisfy material needs, and that this results in complex divisions of labour and specialisations in production relations with different effects on different members of different social classes or associations (Elden, 2007).

The differences between local conditions are significantly important of course (Massey, 1994/2013; Roberts and Green 2013). They have varied from very little economic remodelling of spaces in terms of the capitalist production relation and elements industrialisation and semi-urbanisation, to ones that were remodelled through what could be termed raw material and extraction colonisation to produce a locally-based (and largely to the area initially imported first generation)

economic labour power, whose members were often referred to through geographic markers of origin (Normannen/the Norwegian; Yuggen/from the former Yugoslavia; Skåningen/from the deep south; Stadsbo/from the neighbouring city area; and so on). This importation of labour power is of course necessary for any industrial processes to become established within a rural area and is highly significant for all subsequent social relations, institutions, architectures, and cultural formations that develop there (Lefebvre, 1974/2000), including those of, and related to, educational institutions, formal learning practices, and curricula (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014; Beach et al., 2019; Corbett 2015).

Our research thus identified the presence of differences between various types of rural area in relation to the way settlements develop and concomitant differences then also in the ways education became available, recognised, used, and experienced (Öhrn & Beach, 2019). Furthermore, it has also identified distinct differences in terms of curriculum content and, most distinctly, in relation to how the local context is represented in teaching (Beach et al., 2018). For instance, teaching in semi-urban industrialised rural towns and their peripheries tended to reproduce aspects of the predominant urban discourse that emphasised global interrelations as important, and rurality as a needy problematic context.

Thus, teachers and the local curriculum in the industrialised rural towns tended to acknowledge a dependency relationship on national and global social and economic bonds for developing local value. Whilst in contrast, teachers and pupils in the remote and sparsely populated areas, positioned themselves more distinctly within the local context, which also appeared in educational content and interactions as a place that was valuable more in and of itself: as beautiful, quiet, naturally resourceful, free, and independent. They emphasised moreover, the importance of rural resources both for those living there, and for the nation as a whole. This was also visible in curriculum interactions, because whilst the education relations and interactions in the semi-urban industrialised rural towns (i.e. the locally enacted curriculum there) bore few signs of the local rural spaces as being of value, there was usually a distinctly local feel to the curriculum in the more remote rural area schools. Different symbols and symbolic values, different content, and different interactants were present. In the semi-urban areas, the curriculum in action could have been from anywhere in the country. In the more remote and/or sparsely populated ones, there was a distinct local presence.

The local characteristics were formed then both in terms of the classification and framing relationships of curriculum communication—in terms of levels of (local versus global) specialisation of school (official) knowledge and degrees of insulation of content from the local context—and in respect of local involvement of local agents: both individuals and organisations. The curriculum constructions, however, were in no way possible to connect to the representation of a notion of the rural as representing some form of rural idyll. Local values and people were recognised and made active use of, but even at this level of interaction in school, the idealisation of nature and the construction of a concept of the rural idyll was presented as an urban construct. This construct reflected the urban estrangement from nature and rural conditions rather than an understanding of these things and was on occasions also publicly ridiculed by teachers and pupils in school.

There were also some interesting patterns in terms of what was included from the local context in the classification of school content and what was not. Nature, geography, geology, and local cultural features formed common sources of influence and inclusion—as did references to local historical landmarks and, in some places due to the location, specifically World War Two related history. However, there were exclusions too, with silences around local conflicts, class relations, and tendencies of romanticising historic (working-class) hardships and local bourgeois doings. The latter is similar to findings from urban contexts—with silences on structural, local, and classed conflicts. But the positioning in the local context and the value afforded to it was very different from findings in urban research (c.f. Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Schwartz, 2013). Taken together, this indicates that teaching is unlikely across contexts, to foster general understandings of relations of power, but schools in sparsely populated areas differ from others by addressing and furthering some awareness of specific issues related to socio-spatial justice (e.g. metrocentricism).

Discussion

One of the main emerging points in our investigations are that the intensity of the past or present capitalist production relations in a place will leave distinctive effects on local geographical, geological, environmental, social, economic, and political identities. This is visible in relations to the place and understandings of the role of education with respect to projected futures. However, also important to stress here, is the recognition of the rural condition coming before urban transformations which are brought about through forms of capital being employed to act on the rural space through commodification and agglomeration (Lefebvre, 1974/2000). Some sense of causal efficacy exists then, we suggest, in relation to the policies, institutional recontextualisations of policies, and curriculum interactions in education from materialisations of the forces and relations of production in space even though there is not a strictly simplistic correspondence.

This is not just an incidental point for us. It is pointed out also by Elden (2007), who asserts this to be a principle expressed in the work of Lefebvre (1974/2000) and Massey (1994/2013). Our research in essence also confirms the patterns presented by these researchers. Urbanisation of rural spaces has occurred in the researched areas we have visited, due to a recognition of economic value potential (often geological or geographic) in the rural space: i.e. that is initially inherent in it materially (for instance a navigable river estuary, possibilities for creating an ice-free port, timber, mineral deposits, and so on). Additionally, secondary economic commodifications have then developed from this. So, urbanisation is not being established in a haphazard way. Although we are not describing a predictable system of developments, there is a pattern of colonisation of an extractionist kind that returns little (of) intrinsic value to the rural space.

Our findings suggest that critical understandings of rural-urban or periphery-centrum relations need to be positioned here too. They often concern the critique

of metrocentrism and its neglect of rural-specific material or cultural values, but not socio-economic relations and economic injustices more generally. Material availabilities are significant, but the colonial extraction of value from the local space was rarely locally voiced in terms of capitalist extraction and economic power relations. There was a critique of political economics of extraction and the creation of surplus value led by urban politics, although not seen as an expression of class relations per se. What our historical material analysis identified is that whilst the contextual spatial and geographic-geological characteristics of a place are vitally important, the decisive factor seems to be the ways in which places become deeply drawn into capitalist economic production (or not) and the characteristics of the networks that are formed and involved.

This is a sort of reinvigoration of Marxist social theory relating to spaces and the capitalist mode of production that takes into account both compositional (possibly generic) and 'contextual' (specifically spatial) determinations in the constitution of fields and subjectivities within them (Roberts & Green, 2013). There was also an interesting set of findings connected to it, concerning how the introduction of factory-scale levels of industrial production had created pull forces in certain areas that introduced a new population to the area with new value sets that displaced (outnumbered and swamped) original local ones.

That is the first of three points we want to make in this respect. The second is that the old population tolerated the invasive colonisation and disfiguring effects of industrial production (visual, aural, chemical, and olfactory) on the local nature whilst the new population barely noticed and never mentioned this issue. Industrial disfigurement of the local conditions was already present when they arrived and was also really what brought them there (or most of them anyway) in the first place.

The third is that the local rural environment lost its original configurations of value for the body of the population because of this, and forces of economic production and its values took over, obtaining a significant spatial vitality that was also reproduced within educational institutions, curricula, and interactions. What was formerly identified as of value—i.e. prior to and outside the domain of intensive factory relations of production (specifically original aesthetic and material rural value forms)—had been displaced by technological production relations. Lifestyles change, material conditions change, and local value became identified and communicated in terms of the local production economy and its position within a global network of capitalistic relations. It was also reflected in educational curriculum selections, interactions, and ambitions at both institutional and individual levels.

The industrialisation of the rural economy was not ubiquitous, however. It was geo-temporally highly sporadic, in fact, and incidental to the presence of particularly capitalisable materials and potentialities. When there was an absence of capitalist industrial production or its possibilities, other expressions of spatial value (or force) had to exist to keep a population in place or make a place attractive and able to bear some kind of (natural, social, or cultural) vitality. We could say they existed as spaces for a community for themselves, not only as spaces in themselves with only an actual realised economic exchange value or potential. The intrinsic value was also found to be expressed in the interactions in school.

But what of the places that had once been intensively industrialised along factory production lines for the processes of extraction colonisation which have then been partially or even completely abandoned in these respects? Here are two photographs as examples of European rural industrial decay (Fig. 6.1).



Fig. 6.1 Abandoned industrial factory by GS André. <https://hiveminer.com/Tags/charleroi%2Ccoke>

What we see in these pictures are the results (at least temporary) of what happens after an economic production economy that had displaced local rural value forms in a community had, in its turn, been hollowed out and displaced. Industrial production will rarely have left the local landscape unmarked. Marshes will have been drained, flora and fauna ravaged and removed to be replaced by other species, water-courses may have been polluted (and possibly land, too), and fish-stock and other natural resources poisoned—at least in the worst case scenarios. This means of course that there can be no return to the old value forms—at least in the short and possibly medium term. The material foundations and possibilities are not there. Moreover, given this, often the population will have to abandon the place too and may well do so without reluctance. We have to remember the industrial in-migrating population in the majority had its historical roots in other areas and has no qualms about returning to them, or migrating onwards to new sites of commodified labour where these exist. But of course, in our society today, they rarely do, at least not along the lines of the earlier collectivised forms of union affiliated relatively well-paid labour (Beach & Sernhede, 2011). As the pictures above indicate, the land, now disfigured and possibly polluted, lacks a natural pull force to draw in a new population. Modern day ghost towns are created. Institutions are closed. Infrastructure is allowed to crumble.

As a final point—value is found and communicated in different ways in relation to place. However, it would be odd to think otherwise, as according to Massey (1994/2013) there is always a reason for people to be in a place (or not, as the case may be). These reasons will be visible in, and accountable from, local talk and in local practices—including those of education institutions according to the present research. Their presence challenges typical ideas of rurality as concerned with isolation, poverty, marginalisation, depopulation, conservatism, racism, exclusion and—in particular—passivity and negative valuations of rurality. Instead, these ideas are semi-fictional hegemonic products of modernity and postmodernity that are politically imposed on rural spaces.

We will close by saying four things here. The first is that according to the analysis, rural value can be transfigured, but not emptied out. The second is that it is predominantly metrocentric capitalist economic politics and its extraction colonialist policies that contributes to transfiguring original rural values in rural spaces by recasting them (and their geographies, geologies, and populations) in terms of their commodity forms. The third is that the most violent of these interventions seems to create lasting scars on the landscape and inflict damage to social relations and senses and possibilities of rural permanency. The fourth is that this is visible in terms also of the differences in education relations that tend to develop (or not develop) in rural areas.

Conclusions

Researching with local people in rural spaces and places helped us to transcend the limits imposed on our knowledge of educational social relations by dominant metrocentric hegemonies. It helped us to identify positive understandings of local

value and how people carve out personally meaningful places for education in relation to their lives, values, and ambitions. This seems to be a positive outcome. Yet we have to acknowledge that the values that seem to develop from education consumption are still extremely unevenly dispersed across the social whole according to social class factors, the availability of economic and other useful forms of capital, and that social reproduction in and through educational interchanges is as much of a characteristic of rural education production and consumption as it is in urban areas. Since what we have most convincingly experienced through doing this research is how once an area has become dominated by intense levels of capitalist production relations through the commodification of labour economic exchange, values become the binding points of the social whole and education is used as a tool to escape by rather than as a tool to stay through or return from.

Following Lefebvre (1974/2000), we can show how social space even in education relations is allocated according to class. It reproduces the class structure both on the basis of an abundance of educational space and opportunities for the rich and less for the poor. Like all economies, the political economy of space, including educational space, is based on the idea of scarcity. Class struggle is thoroughly inscribed in it and reflected in terms of an uneven development of urban and rural conditions. The politics of space are not confined to the city. The relationship of centre and periphery is evidenced also in developing countries, in rural areas and institutional availabilities, in the marginal regions of capitalist countries. There is causal efficacy in the forces and relations of production in space and this is reflected in educational possibilities and experiences, even though there is not a strictly simplistic correspondence between them.

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Chapter 7

Charter Schools and the Reconfiguring of the Rural School-Community Connection



Karen Eppley, Annie Maselli, and Kai A. Schafft

Abstract Among educational reforms in the United States over the last two decades, the charter school movement has emblemised policies promoting school choice. While proponents point to the potential for educational innovation and the expansion of educational opportunities for students, charter school expansion has also created significant debate and controversy. In this chapter, we examine the local meaning-making around the formation of four rural charter schools that originated as a result of closure or consolidation. Using data from local key informant interviews in each of the school communities, we investigate the circumstances leading to the formation of these rural charter schools and explore how their creation reconfigured the discursive framing of community and school-community relations. We sought to understand the ways in which stakeholders in rural communities (teachers, community members, administrators, and parents) understand and experience the establishment and operation of the charter school within their community as intended replacements of traditional schools that were closed. The stories told—of four rural school closures, consolidations, and re-openings—underline the complexity of the relationship between a rural school and its community.

Introduction

Charter schools are public schools that receive public tax dollars to cover the costs of their operations. However, rather than being governed by locally elected school boards, they are structured by charters. They also tend not to be unionised and are run by either non-profit or private entities. Importantly, charters are also exempt from

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some regulations under which traditional public schools must abide. Proponents advance charter schools, as alternatives to traditional public schools, as a means of enhancing educational innovation through competition, while at the same time providing educational options to those who would otherwise have few or no other options (Choades, 2018). Among educational reforms in the United States over the last two decades, the charter school movement has arguably most been emblematic of policies promoting “school choice.”

While advocates point to the potential for educational innovation and the expansion of educational opportunities for students (Beck et al., 2016; Smarick, 2014), charter schools are associated with significant debate and controversy. Important questions, for example, have been generated regarding student academic outcomes in charter school settings (Mann et al., 2016). Some studies suggest that charter schools tend to outperform traditional public schools (Choades, 2018), although other studies have found mixed results (Ladd et al., 2017; Logan & Burdick-Will, 2016), or evidence of charter school underperformance (Chingos & West, 2015). Further, a growing body of evidence suggests that urban charter schools are associated with increased racial isolation and re-segregation (Frankeberg et al., 2011; Giersch, 2019; Kotok et al., 2017; Rotberg, 2014).

Fiscal impacts represent an additional source of concern. In most states, school funding policies dictate that funding follows the student to the school they attend. In practice, this means that increases in charter school enrolments represent decreased revenues to traditional public schools (Choades, 2018; Rose et al., 2017). In Pennsylvania, for example, Schafft and colleagues (2014) found that, between the 2006–2007 and 2011–2012 academic years, payments from school districts to charter schools increased from \$527 million to \$1.145 billion by the end of the period, with total disbursements of local and state revenues amounting to \$4.78 billion. While most disbursements accrue from urban school districts because of the high numbers of urban charter schools, the smaller economies of scale among rural schools mean that revenue shortfalls are more difficult to absorb (Schafft et al., 2014).

In 2014–2015 in the United States, 25% of traditional public schools and 57% of brick and mortar charters were located in urban areas. Conversely, while 29% of traditional public schools were located in rural areas, the same was true only for about 11% of brick and mortar charter schools (NCES, 2017). The urban over-representation of urban brick and mortar charter schools is likely related to several factors, including greater density of infrastructure in urban areas, as well as more concentrated populations resulting in a stronger “market” for charter start-ups. As a consequence, “choice” can take on different meanings depending on where a student resides along the urban-rural continuum. While charter schools have proliferated in urban areas, in rural areas the charter school options are often online “cyber charters,” which are largely disconnected from the communities as well as families they serve, and are often characterised by marked academic underperformance (Mann et al., 2016). A Stanford University study, for example, found that not only were online charter schools associated with student academic underperformance, but that cyber charter enrolment was associated with a two to threefold increase in unscheduled student inter-school transfers (Woodworth et al., 2015).

Charter school formation has the potential to threaten the central social and economic roles that rural schools play for the communities they serve (Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Rural schools not only perform educative functions but also are frequently a rural area's largest employer, are associated with higher property values, and play vital socially integrative roles in rural communities, helping to define and reproduce local identity (Lyson, 2002). Low student-density, tight budgets, and a lack of economies of scale means that rural districts can be significantly affected by losing students to charter schools. Even losing just a few dozen students to a charter school can move a district towards considering closing or consolidating schools, particularly under circumstances in which a district is already experiencing enrolment declines and budget shortfalls. School closure and consolidation, often centred as a primary rural education reform strategy throughout the twentieth century, has had negative effects on rural communities, particularly with regard to economic and social impacts (Howley et al., 2011) and can create additional negative outcomes, including transportation issues and longer transits to school (Gristy, 2019). Consequently, charter schools can pose a real or perceived threat not only to rural schools and their social and economic functions, but to the integrity of the communities rural schools serve. This threat is ever heightened in an era of global accountability and assessment where "school choice" can be crafted to sound more like the "better choice" for already under-resourced places, a trend which is increasingly global in scope (Corbett, 2016; Seelig, 2017).

This dynamic is what makes the rural charter schools in this study particularly interesting. The schools were not opened with the intention of disrupting or competing with the traditional community school. Instead, they were opened to *recreate* the traditional community school, recently closed by the home district. In this chapter, we examine the local meaning-making around the formation of four rural charter schools that originated because of closure or consolidation. Using data from local key informant interviews in each of the school communities, we investigated the circumstances leading to the formation of these rural charter schools and explored how their creation reconfigured the discursive framing of community and school-community relations. In sum, we sought to understand the ways in which stakeholders in rural communities (teachers, community members, administrators, and parents) understand and experience the establishment and operation of the charter school within their community. In other words, how might rural charter schools fit within communities where the traditional school was central to the community before its closure?

The Schools and Communities

The project was initiated based on a general interest in the community meanings of rural charter schools in one state and the exercise of community agency in the formation of rural charters, especially in light of the ways in which rural traditional

public schools are typically understood in their community—as primary institutions providing shared social identity, educational provision, and direct and indirect economic benefits. The state’s (anonymised) department of education indicated seven rural brick and mortar charter schools designated as “rural fringe” or “rural distant.” No “rural remote” charter schools existed in the state. Of the seven rural fringe or rural distant schools, five agreed to participate. One school in the data set is not discussed here because it was a private to charter conversion and therefore not as relevant to our purposes within this discussion.

Seventeen in-person interviews were conducted across the four school-community sites. Interviews started with school principals, with subsequent participants identified via snowball sampling. Multiple interviews were conducted at each school with its founders, teachers, parents, and administrators. The participants described their experiences with their school in conversations ranging in length from 20 min to 2½ h. The conversations were open-ended and far-ranging but guided by prepared questions designed to elicit discussion about the topics of community, history or establishment of the school, and current experiences and general reflections on the socio-political and academic contexts in which the school operates. The participants in each of the closure sites described decades-long resistance to the closure of the original, traditional community school. In each case, the group that eventually made the charter application was the same core group that previously organised and advocated for the school to remain open as a traditional public school. At least one representative of this group was interviewed at each school.

In each case, the newly consolidated school was located 14–25 miles from the original community school. The sole argument made by the home-school district for the closure of each of the four community schools was financial. Participants were clear that the traditional schools were not closed as a result of academic concerns. One teacher stated:

...they were high achieving. It was a high achieving school... but because it wasn't, I don't know, 'efficient' or the building maybe was falling apart... they didn't want to spend the money to fix it and they just wanted to consolidate everything.

School improvement arguments for closures have generally been replaced by a desire on the parts of school boards to seek cost savings via economies of scale (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). School consolidation has become a financial project and has therefore “lost its innocence” (Strange, 2013, p. 107).

The impetus to start each of the four charter schools was strikingly similar. The participants at each of the four sites described decades of resistance to the closure of their community school—the same school that many attended when they were students. A parent and current school administrator remembered,

we fought this long...[we] had these meetings and we kind of rallied and fought...We put people on the school board so we could kind of get a vote in our favour. [It was] this whole big saga kind of keeping the school open.

This story was echoed in interview data across each community. Organised groups fought to keep their schools, but ultimately each was closed. The decision to open

the schools cannot be understood separately from the placed nature of its community context constituted by geography, materiality, and community and individual meaning (Kvalsund & Hargreaves, 2014).

There is some evidence to suggest that other narratives might have influenced the decision on the parts of the school boards to close their most outlying school. The image of the “hick town” constructs the rural communities themselves as a problem, suggesting that they needed to be modernised and “fixed”—leading to further disadvantage (Corbett, 2007, p. 24). A particular kind of rural condescension was noted by some participants as a coded rationale for the closure.

A lot of people think we’re a bunch of backwoods people,” stated a founder. Another in their description of the group’s legal manoeuvring that included incorporation and obtaining non-profit status, said, “[we] put our charter together. Bunch of dummies from a rural area.

Informants from all four schools stated that they felt as if the charter approval was successful in part because the organisers were not seen as a viable threat to the district. Perpetuating the backwards/“backwoods” narrative of rural people and places, a founder recounts that the district was “thinking, ‘well, okay. We’ll give them their chance, but they’re not going to make it. They’re going to fail.’” Or as an administrator and parent said,

I think they gave us enough rope to hang ourselves. Go ahead and start your charter school. Do your stuff, and then in a few years, you’ll hang yourself, and we will look like the good guys that gave you the opportunity.

What follows is a brief description of each school community in order to understand how the participants’ descriptions of the charter initiation in their community is positioned in particular histories, geographies, and social peculiarities of each school site.

Riverton

In the early 1800s, a local family built and donated a school building to the logging community of Riverton, with the stipulation that the building remain in use as a school. When the school board voted to close the school in the early 2000s, a community member made public, documents disclosing that the building was not owned by the school district and thus could not be sold as planned after closure. The school district disputed the document unsuccessfully in appellate court. The closing of the traditional school in Riverton, the most remote school in the district, was the culmination of a long history of perceived unequal treatment of the school and its community on the part of the school district. Interview participants described getting inexperienced or troubled teachers; hand-me-down books, furniture, and materials; and poor building maintenance as compared to the main school. To the participants, the closure was a personal affront.

That's like saying, you don't matter in all this history anymore. Your softball team doesn't matter. Your workers don't matter... Even the current board president [said]... when we were doing our renewal last time, he said, "You people down there really irritate me." He says, "You people down there in the river, you want your school. You ruined our efficiencies."

Participants identified themselves as socially, politically, and economically marginalised within the broader rural communities of their school districts. The community members' persistent rural disadvantage was attributed to the personal failings ("you people down the river") rather than understood as inextricably tied to complex social, cultural, geographic, and economic systems at work in their small(er), rural communities.

Jackson

Jackson's charter school largely originated as the outcome of a historically adversarial school district relationship, culminating in, among many local residents, animosity towards the district for closing its community high school. According to one charter school co-founder and lifelong resident who previously represented the community on the district's school board, "each time the school always managed to squeak through and they couldn't get enough votes on their board." Eventually, the school board voted to close the high school. The K-12 charter school opened the following year, leaving just 60 students in the former traditional elementary school for its last year of operation. When asked why the parents enrolled their children in the charter school in such high numbers even before the traditional school was closed, the co-founder stated:

Out of hatred, really. It was. Hatred was a big motivator.... [because they closed the high school]. They just wanted to wash their hands of the district...there's been a longstanding adversarial position between the district and Jackson for many, many, like 50 years.

While the charter school continued important traditions and maintained the function of the previous traditional school as a community centre, the school struggled with declining enrolment, teacher turnover, and student achievement.

Rockridge

Participants' stories about the closing of the traditional school in the rural community of Rockridge referenced the strong community attachment driving families' decision to enrol children in the charter school. The newly consolidated school is unique to the study in terms of the extent to which the student population and relative rurality differs from the former, traditional school. Participants described the traditional school and the charter school as conservative, protective spaces:

I wanted my children to be close to home. I wanted them to have a good school. I wanted them to [pause] be in a school that shared our values [pause]. Being a rural community, we're not exposed to the drugs and the alcohol so much. There are of course divorced families, but not a high percentage of divorced, broken families. There's no violence. There's none of those things that you may find in more of a town-type setting.

The principal of the charter school echoed these sentiments in her description of her clear vision for the school, its children, and families by drawing sharp contrasts between the charter school and the newly consolidated school.

[The charter school is] conservative in values, religious values. Like, we can't do religious instruction, but we're a small community, rural, agriculture. [pause] They're not gonna see kids with mohawks... Our families are conservative... Our kids are much more innocent; let's put it that way, here, because the families are so [much more] conservative than what the kids are exposed to in a regular [schools]... [I haven't had to] talk about the whole gender identity issue... I doubt if I'll have to touch that issue for another 20 years here.

Participants describe Rockridge as a protected space with family values that may be different from the newly consolidated school. The interviewees at this school explicitly engaged the rural idyll in ways participants at other sites did not. The participants' description of the school as conservative, homogeneous, innocent, safe, free of addiction, and "broken families" suggests that the charter school was initiated as a means of inscribing cultural boundaries, insulating the school from the corrupting influences of the larger (less rural) world.

Logansville

In Logansville, one way to understand the community commitment to the traditional school and, the charter school that replaced it, is the duration of the legal battles between the community group and the school district. Originally formed in the 1970s as a sports booster club for the traditional K-12 school, the community group shifted its focus to the maintenance of the traditional school in response to decades of closure threats. The group's first major victory was successful litigation in federal court following the school board's vote to close the school. A civil rights attorney successfully argued on the community's behalf that the district boundaries were gerrymandered: "They were getting twice the representation than we were!" The district was ordered to redistrict. Despite the previous vote to close, the school and the community group entered into an agreement that the school would remain open with the provision that student achievement and cost remained comparable to the main school.

That agreement held until the mid-1990s. Unknown to the community group, and perhaps subsequent boards, the achievement and cost agreement was void with a change in the composition of the school board membership. When the district closed the high school, "Many, many of the families of the secondary kids decided, 'We're just going to home-school,' and they did." During the home-school years, the group, "a bunch of dummies from a rural area," as they described themselves,

reorganised, incorporated, and applied for a \$1500 state grant to write a charter. The district rejected the first charter three times, but the charter appeals board approved the charter each time on appeal. The next three renewals were similarly rejected at the district level, but subsequently approved on appeal. The community group was not to be deterred in their wish to have a school in Logansville.

Although this community group and its district litigated for their interests in ways that make them unique among the other three schools, the *struggle* to maintain the traditional school is common across all four communities. The rural community members sought what they thought was best for their children and community—keeping the traditional school open. When that became impossible, the “choice” was to open a charter school to replace the traditional school or accept the loss of the traditional community school. This was true across all four sites. Three themes are common from the participants’ descriptions of their understandings of the formation of the school: school as the heart of the community, the community in the school, and a school for *which* community.

School as the “Heart of Community”

In all four communities, the same community groups who had previously organised to advocate for the traditional public school drove the process for the respective charter applications. For two of the cases, charter school legislation had only recently become law. Rural charter schools were very much uncharted territory. None of the four charters were initiated as a means of pushing a “school choice” agenda; they were opened to choose *their* school—their community school. Each participant made a clear distinction that they were not opening a new school but re-opening *their* school. Charters in this study were utilised as a resilience tactic, illuminating larger systems threatening the vitality of rural schools. Participants were also adamant that the re-opening of their school was more than just keeping a school open for convenience—it was about community sustainability and survival.

Several participants directly stated that “the school is at the heart of our community” and a “town without a school is nothing.” Even further, one founder said,

there would be actually no reason to come down here, without a school... it was about the survival of the town. We had several instances that we cited where schools had been closed in small towns and the town just kinda dried up and went away.

Participants described the school as a community centre, gathering space, centre for social activities, and the identity of the town. One parent and founder stated that the move to seek a charter was, in part, response to fears of having a community without a school. Not having a school was, “the ‘you’ll kill our town,’ kind of thing... It’ll be detrimental to the whole town, to the finances, to the property values. People will leave.” Consistent with the literature about the importance of a school to its community (e.g., Tieken, 2014; Lyson, 2002; Sherman & Sage, 2011), keeping a

school in the community would not only benefit the town economically, but, as participants described, keeping the school meant keeping a powerful force for the community.

While local groups of stakeholders spearheaded the charter application, opening the schools represented a community-wide effort. In one town, meetings about the charter school would have a minimum of 50 people and that is “a lot for a town that size,” recounted a founder. A notable challenge to opening the charter schools involved the timing of the closures, typically announced in the spring. This timeline was a formidable challenge and required that work be distributed among groups and sub-groups of people. The community had only a few months to mobilise, apply for the charter, and ensure sufficient infrastructure to open in September. The community involvement continued over time once the school opened in year one. A group of founders stated that the “we started out by buying the property. Sandwich sales and walkathons and car washes. We were able to talk the local bank into giving us a little bit.” In one of the cases, when the district listed the school building for sale, a group of community members formed a real estate association and purchased the building to lease to the school. All four charter schools started in the original school buildings that had been in their respective communities for generations. In addition, local businesses in each community area donated supplies and furniture, as the districts removed everything before the sale. Another principal remembers that “they were in here cleaning the toilets. They were in here, these parents, they did it.” Participants in each community described a process involving multiple groups, individuals, and businesses that contributed ideas, time, and money in order to keep a school in the communities.

The Community in the School

While participants described many ways in which charter law negatively impacted their charter schools, participants at each school site described their new (relative) autonomy from district oversight in positive ways. Participants across sites described their feelings of disenfranchisement within the district, underlined by a school board composition favouring the main school. Although not elected, the charter boards only operated its charter school, whereas the previous, traditional school boards had only one or two of nine representatives to speak for the concerns of the outlying community. The establishment of the charter afforded community members a more direct line between the school and the community. A CEO spoke about financing various community efforts, specifically recounting funding a project by their local Lions Club. One of the teachers spoke about the flexibility of having concerts and academic programs on the weekends, allowing for the school to accommodate their working parents and community members. Participants felt that flexibility over funding allocation and school hours was not possible under their previous structure and union governance.

Another teacher spoke to the enhanced ability for administrative and pedagogic creativity due to less bureaucracy. “A lot of the people that come here to work are more creative, they’re more open to new ideas, they’re not being dictated by one central school district that says all the schools have to operate within our parameters.” While each of the four schools centre the community in the work of their charter to some extent, two of the four specifically name place-based educational practices (e.g. Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Theobald, 1997; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Respondents from these schools spoke at length about various programs, including focusing on local heritage and history, raising and butchering animals, sewing, and expeditionary learning. A teacher stated:

A pillar of the charter school is that you have to include the environment in your classroom. Being outside and going on nature walks and doing all the fun things you can do when you’re so rural. Experience that part of science and that part of life. Being able to make up apple cider and ride tractors and all those kinds of things. Those are just a little extra special.

Respondents in all four schools described a goal of fostering a deeper connection between students, their geographical settings, and communities via their involvement with the surrounding area.

While respondents from each school mentioned the importance of athletics and the challenges around growing an athletic team due to their smaller size, one school CEO spoke at length about their plans for a new gymnasium. Not only did she describe the athletic events that took place at the former school and their importance to the community, but also how the planned space will involve the community:

They can do things like craft shows, and food truck wars, and plays... They’re talking about adding a whole athletic facility because there’s no [community] gym. There’s no place for people to work out. There’s no place for people to walk whenever it’s raining and things like that.

In two of the communities, the school was mentioned explicitly as the shelter-in-place/emergency location for the entire town. All offer adult-education classes for community members. The participants described the physical school facilities, its events, technology, and staff as providing a wide range of opportunities for the community, and further identified these assets as reasons for people to stay in the community. From their perspectives, the new charter schools are better than the previous traditional schools at engaging the local community.

A School for Which Community?

Charter school finances were named as a stressor across all four communities. While participants reported that some of the fiscal challenges are alleviated by student enrolment from other districts—and the charters are, in fact, dependent upon enrolment from other districts—the number of out-of-district students was an unknown when the groups made their applications. In the case of the oldest school in the study, its co-founder indicated that the community group did not know that charters were open

to students from other districts initially. In all four schools, participants identified the small size of the school and the individualised nature of the schools as important assets. A founder stated that, “Here, every child means something to us.” Participants described how individualised attention was an important pull factor in their success. A teacher explained, “students that were kicked out of other schools, or outcasts, or just a number, are coming here and succeeding.” One CEO and founder called their school an “island of misfits,” explaining their belief that the close-knit nature of the school was often highly supportive of student needs. The same CEO stated that the home district and surrounding districts see them as a “dumping ground” for students they decide to “kick out.”

Across all four schools, respondents reported having a larger percentage of special education students than in the traditional school that the charter school was intended to replace. From one teachers’ point of view:

our special education population is disproportionately higher than it is in the general population because we tend to serve them better with a smaller class sizes... and more individual attention. And, the hands-on learning is more conducive to a lot of the things that they’re experiencing.

One principal described her concern with how their relatively high special education population could be perceived negatively by the school district in the charter renewal process. Another principal described the high number of special education students as an unexpected, major challenge in the first years of operation. However, even though the charter schools serve students with and without disabilities from outside of their small communities, from the perspectives of the teachers and administrators, children from outside the community felt like they belong. “That’s the added bonus is that the charter school provides this spot where everybody kind of feels ownership for it. Because they belong,” said a teacher.

Two of the charter schools mentioned a tapering off of parent involvement as the school community changed to include children from outside the community. For example, one school required 20 parent volunteer hours per academic year. One participant said they rarely had to keep track at the onset, having a surplus of support. Now, they had a hard time finding volunteers, “especially for people that are driving from farther away.” A respondent from another school echoed this sentiment stating:

It’s just a whole different batch of parents. ... The school doesn’t feel the parental support like it used to because it really used to be the parents. Like one of the parents did the billings. They did a lot of the work at the school. And as we’ve grown, we’ve gotten more to our maximum capacity and its different parents. It’s very hard to get the parental support like we had initially, you know? Very hard.

The impact of the traditional school closure and its charter replacement is not limited to its host community. While from the perspective of the teachers, children transported from outside of the host district to attend the charter schools feel like they belong in the school designed to be a school for the community, participants at two schools note that students from *outside* the community have longer bus rides to the charter school than the *local community* students would have had if they had opted to attend the newly consolidated school. Beyond this observation, the participants did

not discuss the impact of their charter school on schools in neighbouring districts. In all four cases, the opening of the charter school enabled community members to keep their children in the community, but also, unintentionally, introduced enrolment competition to small schools in neighbouring school districts. While all participants emphasised their success in forging meaningful connections between the school and its host community, particular aspects of state charter school law are at odds with founders' goal to reproduce the closed school. As the charter grew and shifted, so has its school community.

Reflections

In each of the four communities in this study, citizens advocated over a span of 20–40 years for their community schools. As one founder put it, “The cloud of closure had been there for generations.” One group argued successfully in court against closure as early as the mid-1970s. Declining enrolment in all four communities eventually gave purchase to the school board's argument that closures were necessary in order to provide the best possible return on taxpayer dollars. However, because the community groups focused on keeping the community schools open instead of planning for charters, the school boards did not take into consideration the possibility that charters could open in place of the community school. The significant financial implications of charters were therefore not considered by the school boards in their estimation of the potential costs savings from school closures. The efficiency argument made for school consolidation in absence of charters is tenuous (Howley et al., 2011), but largely illusory when charter costs are considered (Schafft et al., 2014).

Local, state and national school policy on issues such as school consolidation, closure, funding, and charter law is urban-normative, but tends to have unique impact on rural communities. Since “rural communities depend heavily upon their schools, as state and federal governments reform rural schools, they also change these communities” (Tieken, 2014, p. 27). Policy change is not just policy change; it is social change. As a school employee and parent stated, “We were born out of necessity.” The stories told here—of four rural school closures, consolidations, and re-openings—underline the complexity of the relationship between a rural school and its community. When asked to consider the possibility of the charter closing like the community school, one CEO was clear in his belief that if the charter faced closure, the community would undoubtedly band together as they had done before.

The charter schools in this study challenge the urban charter narrative of school failure, efficiency, discrimination, and community disintegration. While rural charters function under the same policy as urban or suburban charters, important differences in management, context, and purpose combine to constitute a unique application of charter school policy, adding complexity to the charter school debates. Most critically, the rural community charters in this study are not weaponised neoliberal school reform. The citizens making the charter applications paradoxically used the tools of neoliberal school reform as a tool to attempt to *maintain* tradition, local

ways, community control, and rural community sustainability. The creation of these four schools reveals a larger flaw in the system as a whole, as rural schools closure tactics in the name of “efficiency” cause harm to rural people and places. Charters in this study were the tool employed to patch together their school and community. The traditional schools could not be replicated.

In each case, the schools were opened by community groups with the singular goal of keeping a school in the community. However, the neoliberal mechanisms that made the schools possible remain relevant in the day-to-day operation of the schools. Thus, the schools are tenuously and paradoxically positioned as neoliberal institutions on the one hand, and traditional community institutions on the other. Some have advocated for rural (brick and mortar) charter schools as a means of preserving rural school and community vitality (e.g. Smarick, 2014). These cases suggest the circumstances under which this may occur. And yet, school closure and consolidation and the ascent of charter schools in the United States both spring, as we have noted, from the same class of educational reforms. Further, in most cases for rural students, the only realistic charter school options are cyber charters which are dis-embedded from rural community and in many cases are clearly substandard educational options. We see these cases, therefore, as examples of (rural) community agency and rural people making use of any available mechanism to preserve their local institutions—even mechanisms that originated from reforms that arguably and in the long run have undermined rural school and community well-being.

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Chapter 8

Erasing Rurality: On the Need to Disaggregate Statistical Data



Philip Roberts, Michael Thier, and Paul Beach

Abstract This chapter examines statistical categorisations used to determine rurality in public policy regarding education and the impact these categorisations have on describing and measuring data that depicts educational achievement and access. Drawing on models used in Australia and the USA, the chapter illustrates how different levels of inclusion of statistical areas in what is deemed ‘rural’ in data analysis can produce significantly different results. The chapter shows the importance of disaggregating data categories to gain the most precise picture of educational achievement and access. The approaches presented in this chapter suggest ways to overcome the significant problem of grouping communities and categories in ways that can generate misleading comparisons and conclusions.

‘We’re in a bubble’: Country kids left behind as education gap widens. (Cook & Butt, 2019)

This headline, on the front page of a major Melbourne (Australia) newspaper, is typical of many that appear regularly around the world. It reflects the typical narrative around rural schools and academic achievement that usually pertain to some form of educational disadvantage, often expressed in terms of standardised test scores, overall outcomes, or matriculation to further education and training. ‘Rural’, or some similar label such as ‘country’ in the example above, is often used as a catchall for places beyond large metropolitan centres. While comparison is generally overt, a more insidious metro-normativity is often involved, with the stated comparison usually relying upon an unstated metropolitan norm (Roberts & Green, 2013). In these comparisons the rural is destined to come off second best, as across any plane of comparison the ‘average’ will always necessarily be somewhere that is not ‘rural’ due to overall

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population distributions. While not dismissing the need to continue to improve the outcomes from education for rural students, we argue here that these constant comparisons using aggregated categories only undermine attempts at reform by perpetuating a sense of hopelessness, while also obscuring the successes of rural schools. That is, they erase the positives of rurality within educational achievement data in favour of valorising the city. In this chapter, we argue for the need to disaggregate statistical data, using two international examples—one from Australia and one from the USA. In the first portion of this chapter, we explore the association between remoteness and Literacy and Numeracy scores in Australia before a similar exploration of the association between remoteness and access to Advanced Placement coursework in the USA.

In making this argument we are encouraging researchers to be explicit in describing which groupings they have collapsed in their analysis (see Chapter 2 of this volume), while also suggesting the need to ensure that disaggregated analysis of phenomena are included where it is possible to do so. Where this does not happen, rural researchers are only reinforcing the hegemony of metrocentric systems of education (Roberts & Green, 2013). This is a concern as in much academic research purporting to be about rural schools, researchers often don't detail what constitutes rural in their research and/or use 'rural' as a broad category, often with minimal or no description (Roberts & Downes, 2016).

Nationally, many countries use a form of statistical definition in the collection and reporting of student outcome data. These definitions are however not internationally uniform, making international comparisons problematic. Complicating international comparisons further are the locational or community characteristics used in international tests such as PISA or TIMSS, with town size and groupings such as metropolitan, provincial and remote often used in reporting (Sullivan et al., 2018). Following on it should also be recognised that the metropolitan, city or urban category of description is beset with similar contradictions. After all, cities are diverse spaces with gradations of advantage and disadvantage. As such we suggest a similar disaggregation of data is necessary in these contexts, as the outcomes and opportunities of children living in advantaged areas can often be much greater than those in less advantaged communities (Roberts et al., 2019). There are an array of statistical spatial geographies in use that can be used in examining data within cities and more broadly. In this chapter, we are concerned with two such statistical spatial geographies that are commonly used in reporting educational outcomes, one each in Australia and the USA.

Before proceeding to our two examples though, we address two caveats. Firstly, we are not suggesting through this discussion that everything is measurable in numbers, indeed we agree with many of the critiques of 'policy as numbers' (Lingard, 2011). Particularly as, secondly, the focus upon numbers here does not engage the many other factors that constitute rural schooling, or the many successes of rural schools reported by rural education researchers. That said, we do note that much research, and policy intervention, is justified by reference to numbers and aimed at addressing

‘disadvantage’ as presented through numbers. As a way forward for the rural education field, we suggest that, where used, numbers need to be appropriately representative and the method of their construction, such as the categories collapsed together, need to be thoughtfully considered and thoroughly explained. In representing rural students with numbers rural education researchers that understand what the categories of description mean in real rural communities is essential. This is the value rural education researchers bring, as opposed to someone who has never worked in these contexts and sees only the numbers. Finally, we also note that there is little rural education research using numbers (Roberts & Downes, 2016) and that, consequently, this is a space almost vacated by rural education researchers. This is a concern as it then leaves the space, arguably that which attracts most policy attention, to those without an understanding of rural people, places and communities.

An Australian Example: *Remoteness and Literacy and Numeracy Results*

National geographies and cultures are important in situating the discussion we embark upon here. In the Australian context, ‘city’ usually denotes the state capitals and rural, regional, remote or country used as a catchall for everywhere else—as observed in the quote that begins this chapter. Geographically, Australia occupies a vast space, being the only nation and continent. It has a highly urbanised population with over 85% of the population living in urban areas, within 50 km of the coast. Indeed, the greater Sydney and Melbourne areas comprise nearly half the population of Australia (ABS 2016). This representation of, for example ‘greater Sydney’, an area that comprises the nearby commuter regions up to 150 km in direct line distance around the city centre, is often the region to which the synonyms for ‘city’ refers.

Statistical Geography in Australia pertaining to remoteness uses the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) (ABS, 2011). In this classification, remoteness areas are based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) (University of Adelaide, 2018) and measure the remoteness of a point to the nearest urban centre from major cities through to remote areas, based on distance, population density and access to services. This categorisation came into effect in July 2011 as a more stable and consistent statistical structure than its predecessor (ABS, 2011)—referred to below as the 2006 schema. For our purposes here the substantive change was a shift from four categories of metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote to five categories, these being major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote. While an advance, we do recognise that even these schemata do not capture the diversity of rural communities as captured by Reid et al. (2010) in the Rural Social Space Model (see Chapter 3). Australian statistical geography does include a number of approaches to grouping areas, from statistical areas of approximately 200 houses to much larger groupings of districts and states, and the ASGS as described (Hugo, 2014). However, statistical geographies other than the ASGS are

based upon houses and/or settlements, such as the small towns statistical geography (ABS, 2018a), and are not helpful in rural education research as they separate towns and schools from their surrounds, and create an ambiguous cut regarding students who live beyond the towns statistical boundary.

In this example, we will refer to data from the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), a national standardised census style test that all students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 complete. This is administered by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) with annual results reported and available back to 2008 (see <https://reports.acara.edu.au>). We note this as ACARA only changed to using the new ASGS categorisation for reporting results and locating schools from 2016.

As illustrated by the quote we began this chapter with, ‘rural’ schools in Australia are often presented as disadvantaged, with students falling behind their, we assume, metropolitan peers. Notable in this presentation is that the five-point ASGS scale is seldom used. Instead ‘rural’ and increasingly ‘regional’ are used in what appears to be a collapsing of the inner regional and outer regional categories. The occasional reference to ‘remote’ is a bit more problematic as it seems, given the examples often cited, to really refer more to the actual ASGS category of ‘very remote’, itself suggesting that schools in the remote ASGS category may often sit in this rural or regional grouping.

One noted trend, more common in the academic literature, is to use catchall phrases in titles and when advancing the main arguments but then to detail more nuanced categorisations in tables and their accompanying exegesis (e.g. Halsey, 2018; Lamb et al., 2014). A leading example of this is a recent Australian Federal Government review into the status of rural, regional and remote education (Halsey, 2018). Here the executive summary and main descriptions use language such as “the achievements of RRR (rural, regional and remote) students have in the main lagged behind urban students for decades” and “The national statistics show there is a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated” (Halsey, 2018, p. 4). The report then moves to data tables and explanations that do refer to the broader ASGS schema. We raise this as it highlights the complexity here, and the issue at hand.

Diverging from previous studies that have examined overall disadvantage, we model for the effect of remoteness above and beyond the contribution of several other variables that have also been linked to disadvantage. In this example, we explore two related questions. First, to what extent do two coding schemata—the 2006 Australian Remoteness Structure or its 2011 successor, Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS)—correlate in their inclusion of schools into various geographic locale categories? Second, to what extent do those coding schemata differ as approaches to modelling school-aggregated means of reading and numeracy NAPLAN scores?

To address these exploratory questions, we examined 2011 academic year NAPLAN data in reading and numeracy from all New South Wales (NSW) schools with grade spans that included Year 3 ($N = 2,414$). We use 2011 data out of convenience, as we had this school-level data, and it allows us to test the two schemata prior to ACARA recategorising schools. The use of this 2011 data also enables us

Table 8.1 Year 3 Reading NAPLAN score (2011) R^2 (Roberts 2016)

Category	R^2
Major cities	0.711
Inner regional	0.627
Outer regional	0.473
Remote	0.031
Very remote	0.585

to build upon a finding by Roberts (2016) regarding the coefficient of determination (R^2) between student social background and reading achievement in year 3, which used the same data. A coefficient of determination (R^2) represents the degree of relationship between two variables on a scale of -1 to 1 , where the closer to -1 or 1 a result is the more associated the two variables are deemed to be. In this example, the average socio-economic status of the school was placed against average reading scores, as a typical explanation for ‘rural’ underachievement is the lower average socio-economic status of rural communities. Roberts (2016) found though that rather than reproducing disadvantage ‘rural’ schools had a lesser relationship between average socio-economic background than schools in major cities (see Table 8.1)—that is, family background is more associated with literacy scores in the city than in the country, or, the categories of rural schools do more with their students than city schools. This is counter the general narrative, and a non-reported good news story for these schools, that is revealed when disaggregated approaches are employed.

Method

For this example, we examined 2011 academic year NAPLAN data in reading and numeracy from all New South Wales schools with grade spans that included Year 3 ($N = 2,414$). Our exploratory study incorporated nine school-level variables, including two criteria (i.e. reading and numeracy scores) and seven variables that facilitated between-school comparisons. Our predictor, geographic locale, was categorical, as was sector, one of the six covariates we used in our models to address the second research question. We also included five continuous covariates: enrolment, attendance rate, full-time equivalent of working adults (FTE), proportion of students who were indigenous (indigenous%), and proportion of students who were from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE%).

This example was based upon a secondary analysis of naturally occurring administrative data, supplied under application to the responsible authority (ACARA). Schools were dummy-coded schools to reflect each level of 2006 and 2011 schemata they related to, using their location codes relevant to both schema. In relation to our measures, reading and numeracy scores were available for 2,072-of-2,415 schools (85.8%). The rest were estimated with full information maximum likelihood. Reading

Table 8.2 Remoteness structures and sector for New South Wales Schools Serving Year 3

Geographic locale ($N = 2,414$)	n	%
2006 coding schema		
Metropolitan	1,400	58.0
Provincial	951	39.4
Remote	47	1.9
Very remote	16	0.7
Missing cases	0	0.0
2011 coding schema		
Major cities	1,341	55.6
Inner regional	697	28.9
Outer regional	331	13.7
Remote	25	1.0
Very remote	16	0.7
Missing cases	4	0.1
<i>Sector</i>	n	%
Government	1,689	70.0
Catholic	425	17.6
Independent	300	12.4
Missing cases	0	0.0

scores averaged $M = 417.32$ ($SD = 43.94$) and numeracy scores averaged $M = 401.48$ ($SD = 36.28$). Neither criterion demonstrated excessive kurtosis ($0.10 < y_{1,2} < 0.21$, $SE = 0.11$) or skew ($-0.16 < y_{1,2} < 0.13$, $SE = 0.05$).

Not unexpectedly, given the population distribution of NSW, our study featured an unbalanced design (Table 8.2). Among our 2,414 schools, 1,332 were metropolitan under the 2006 coding schema and major city under the 2011 coding schema (95.1% of the 2006 metropolitan-coded schools). Another 66 were inner regional under the 2011 coding schema (4.7%). Of the 951 schools coded *provincial* under the 2006 coding schema, 631 were coded inner regional under the 2011 coding schema (66.4% of the 2006 provincial-coded schools). Another 310 were coded outer regional (32.6%) and 9 major city (1.0%) under the 2011 coding schema. Of the 47 schools coded *remote* under the 2006 coding schema, 25 retained the remote designation under the 2011 coding schema (53.2% of the 2006 remote-coded schools). Another 19 were coded outer regional (40.4%) and 3 remote (6.4%) under the 2011 coding schema. Of the 16 schools coded *very remote* under the 2006 coding schema, 13 retained the remote designation under the 2011 coding schema (81.3% of the 2006 very remote-coded schools). Another two were coded outer regional (12.5%) under the 2011 coding schema. Four schools 2006 codes but were missing 2011 codes: two that had been metropolitan and one each provincial and very remote.

All five of our continuous covariates were measured variables from independent observations (Table 8.3). Enrolment was a count of students at the latest student

Table 8.3 Descriptive statistics for New South Wales schools serving year 3 ($N = 2,414$)

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	Missing
Enrolment	2	2,214	296.91	266.72	1.85	5.97	0.2
Attendance rate	64.0	100.0	93.62	2.58	-2.93	19.17	0.6
FTE	0.0	349.6	24.20	28.21	4.51	30.61	0.0
Indigenous%	0.0	100.0	7.41	12.57	4.01	20.76	4.7
LBOTE%	0.0	100.0	19.89	26.40	1.50	1.15	1.7

Note FTE = full-time equivalence of teachers and non-teacher adult employees; Indigenous % = proportion of students from indigenous backgrounds; LBOTE% = proportion of students from language backgrounds other than English; Missing = proportion of cases with missing data for the given variable

census data, with attendance reported as a rolling year average. FTE totalled the full-time equivalence of teachers and the full-time equivalence on non-teacher adult employees in a school. Indigenous% and LBOTE% were both proportions of schools' enrolment counts. Enrolment (5.97 , $SE = 0.10$), attendance rate (19.17 , $SE = 0.10$), indigenous% (20.76 , $SE = 0.10$), and FTE (30.61 , $SE = 0.10$) were leptokurtotic (Mardia, 1970), indicating a disproportionate number of outliers for each of those variables. Attendance rate showed moderately negative skew (-2.93 , $SE = 0.05$); school's FTE (4.51 , $SE = 0.05$) and indigenous% (4.01 , $SE = 0.05$) skewed positively.

Sector was our other categorical variable, a covariate that described whether a government, Catholic diocese or independent entity operated a school. Regarding sector, 1,689-of-2,414 were government operated (70.0%). Another 425 were in the Catholic sector (17.6%) and 300 were independent (12.4%). We dummy-coded schools both as 0 = government and 1 = Catholic and 0 = government and 1 = independent. There were no missing data for sector.

Tables 8.4 and 8.5 describe the path models we used to address our research question. Structural equation modelling (i.e. path analysis) was chosen for this inquiry because it is a flexible approach for exploratory analysis and can handle a system of regressions simultaneously in which all variables are observed, rather than latent (Kline, 2015). After testing the data for multivariate normality (Mardia, 1970) in SPSS (IBM, 2019), we used the Lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012). We fit models for each of the remoteness structures with all of the observed variables described in the previous sections. Model 1 featured the 2006 remoteness structure with metropolitan schools as the reference group. Figures 8.1 and 8.2 outline the equations used. Both models were just identified ($df = 0$), meaning we could generate an algebraic solution, but could not produce goodness-of-fit indices to evaluate multiple solutions comparatively.

Table 8.4 Correlations of TK

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Reading	×																	
2. Numeracy	.89	×																
3. Enrolment	.29	.28	×															
4. Attend	.45	.43	.21	×														
5. FTE	.24	.23	.89	.12	×													
6. Indig. %	-.53	-.49	-.23	-.55	-.12	×												
7. LBOTE%	.05*	.08	.33	.24	.22	-.24	×											
Sector																		
8. Govt	-.33	-.30	.20	-.00 ^N	-.26	.16	-.04 ^N	×										
9. Catholic	.18	.12	-.01 ^N	.02 ^N	-.07**	-.13	.02 ^N	-.71	×									
10. Indep	.26	.28	.29	-.02 ^N	.45	-.07	.03 ^N	-.58	-.17	×								
2006																		
11. Metro	.26	.25	.42	.32	.29	-.32	.53	-.10	.03 ^N	.10	×							
12. Provis	-.23	-.22	-.38	-.24	-.27	.21	-.50	.09	-.03 ^N	-.08	-.95	×						
13. Remote	-.11	-.09	-.11	-.20	-.07**	.25	-.09	.03 ^N	.01 ^N	-.05**	-.17	-.11	×					
14. VR	-.12	-.10	-.07	-.16	-.05*	.27	-.05*	.02 ^N	-.01 ^N	-.02 ^N	-.10	-.07**	-.01 ^N	×				
2011																		
15. Major	.28	.26	.43	.32	.30	-.32	.55	-.11	.05*	.10	.94	-.89	-.16	-.09	×			
16. Inner	-.12	-.12	-.24	-.13	-.18	.09	-.39	.07**	-.06**	-.03 ^N	-.63	.67	-.09	-.05*	-.71	×		
17. Outer	-.22	-.19	-.26	-.20	-.18	.20	-.25	.07**	-.00 ^N	-.10	-.47	.44	.11	-.00 ^N	-.45	-.26	×	
18. Remote	-.07**	-.05*	-.07**	-.14	-.04 ^N	.21	-.07**	-.00 ^N	.04 ^N	-.04 ^N	-.12	-.08	.73	-.01 ^N	-.12	-.07**	-.04*	×

(continued)

Table 8.4 (continued)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19. VR	-.13	-.11	-.07	-.21	-.04 ^N	.31	-.05*	.01 ^N	.00 ^N	-.02 ^N	-.10	-.07**	.10	.84	-.09	-.05*	-.03 ^N	-.01 ^N

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; Proportions without superscript are significant, $p < .001$; N indicates $p > .05$
Note (1) Reading = School-aggregated 2011 NAPLAN reading scores (Year 3); (2) Numeracy = School-aggregated 2011 NAPLAN numeracy scores (Year 3); (3) Enrollment = total number of students enrolled in 2011; (4) Attend = attendance rate; (5) FTE = full-time equivalence of teachers and non-teacher adult employees; (6) Indig. % = proportion of students from indigenous backgrounds; (7) LBOTE% = proportion of students from language backgrounds other than English; (8) Govt = schools that are government run; (9) Catholic = schools that are run by a Catholic diocese; (10) Indep = schools that are run privately; (11) Metro = schools coded as Metropolitan in the 2006 Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) remoteness structure; (12) Provis = schools coded as Provisional in the 2006 ASGS; (13) Remote = schools coded as Remote in the 2006 ASGS; (14) VR = schools coded as Very Remote in the 2006 ASGS; (15) Major = schools coded as Major City in the 2011 ASGS; (16) Inner = schools coded as Inner Regional in the 2011 ASGS; (17) Outer = schools coded as Outer Regional in the 2011 ASGS; (18) Remote = schools coded as Remote in the 2011 ASGS; (19) VR = schools coded as VR in the 2011 ASGS

Table 8.5 Modelling school-level predictors of NAPLAN reading and numeracy scores

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Reading				
Intercept	5.92	39.33	11.10	39.38
Variance	1,084.77***	34.51	1,076.89***	34.27
Covariates				
Enrolment	0.04***	0.01	0.04***	0.01
Attendance rate	4.42***	0.42	4.38***	0.42
FTE	-0.17*	0.07	-0.17*	0.07
Indigenous%	-1.32***	0.10	-1.30***	0.09
LBOTE%	-0.30***	0.03	-0.32***	0.03
Sector: Catholic	18.88***	1.90	18.64***	1.90
Sector: Independent	27.64***	3.53	27.58***	3.53
Locale (2006): Provisional	-9.16***	1.91		
Locale (2006): Remote	22.19**	7.29		
Locale (2006): Very remote	9.29	15.63		
Locale (2011): Inner regional			-10.80***	2.02
Locale (2011): Outer regional			-13.71***	2.81
Locale (2011): Remote			17.01*	8.01
Locale (2011): Very remote			27.32*	13.48
Numeracy				
Intercept	45.88	33.89	45.21	33.96
Variance	805.53***	25.63	800.94***	25.49
Covariates				
Enrolment	0.03***	0.01	0.03***	0.01
Attendance rate	3.79***	0.36	3.81***	0.36
FTE	-0.18**	0.06	-0.18**	0.06
Indigenous%	-0.94***	0.08	-0.94***	0.08
LBOTE%	-0.17***	0.03	-0.18***	0.03
Sector: Catholic	11.21***	1.64	10.98***	1.64
Sector: Independent	24.93***	3.05	25.12***	3.04
Locale (2006): Provisional	-5.05**	1.65		
Locale (2006): Remote	22.94***	6.28		
Locale (2006): Very remote	18.43	13.47		
Locale (2011): Inner regional			-6.89***	1.74
Locale (2011): Outer regional			-6.08*	2.43
Locale (2011): Remote			22.66**	6.91
Locale (2011): Very remote			32.66**	11.63

(continued)

Table 8.5 (continued)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Covariance (Reading/numeracy)	776.92***	27.34	771.70***	27.17

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Note FTE = full-time equivalence of teachers and non-teacher adult employees; Indigenous % = proportion of students from indigenous backgrounds; LBOTE% = proportion of students from language backgrounds other than English

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Reading}_i &= 1 + \text{Enrollment}_i + \text{AttendanceRate}_i + \text{FTE}_i + \text{Indigenous}\%_i && \text{(Equation 1)} \\
 &+ \text{LBOTE}\%_i + \text{Sector_Catholic}_i + \text{Sector_Independent}_i + \text{Provisional}_i \\
 &+ \text{Remote}_i + \text{Very Remote}_i + \varepsilon_i \\
 \text{Numeracy}_i &= 1 + \text{Enrollment}_i + \text{AttendanceRate}_i + \text{FTE}_i + \text{Indigenous}\%_i && \text{(Equation 2)} \\
 &+ \text{LBOTE}\%_i + \text{Sector_Catholic}_i + \text{Sector_Independent}_i + \text{Provisional}_i \\
 &+ \text{Remote}_i + \text{Very Remote}_i + \varepsilon_i \\
 \text{Reading}_i &\sim \text{Numeracy}_i && \text{(Equation 3)}
 \end{aligned}$$

Fig. 8.1 Model 1 equation using 2006 schema

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Reading}_i &= 1 + \text{Enrollment}_i + \text{AttendanceRate}_i + \text{FTE}_i + \text{Indigenous}\%_i && \text{(Equation 4)} \\
 &+ \text{LBOTE}\%_i + \text{Sector_Catholic}_i + \text{Sector_Independent}_i + \text{Inner}_i \\
 &+ \text{Outer}_i + \text{Remote}_i + \text{Very Remote}_i + \varepsilon_i \\
 \text{Numeracy}_i &= 1 + \text{Enrollment}_i + \text{AttendanceRate}_i + \text{FTE}_i + \text{Indigenous}\%_i && \text{(Equation 5)} \\
 &+ \text{LBOTE}\%_i + \text{Sector_Catholic}_i + \text{Sector_Independent}_i + \text{Inner}_i \\
 &+ \text{Outer}_i + \text{Remote}_i + \text{Very Remote}_i + \varepsilon_i \\
 \text{Reading}_i &\sim \text{Numeracy}_i && \text{(Equation 6)}
 \end{aligned}$$

Fig. 8.2 Model 2 equation using 2011 schema

Results

This study revealed that the situation is indeed more complex than the simple representation of results often presented (Tables 8.4 and 8.5), supporting the need to take a more nuanced approach to examining educational outcomes. We found that in Model 1 (2006 schema) both literacy and numeracy scores associate significantly and negatively with the provisional designation, significantly and positively with the remote designation, but not significantly with the very remote designation. In Model 2 (2011 schema) both literacy and numeracy scores associate significantly and negatively with the inner regional designation only. Outer regional associates with negative literacy scores, but only trends towards negative significance for numeracy scores. Meanwhile, literacy scores trend towards positive significance for literacy for remote and very remote designations. By contrast, numeracy scores associate strongly and positively with remote and very remote designations. Significantly, the differences between provisional designation in the 2006 schema and the inner and outer regional

designations in the 2011 schema indicate that the 2011 schema, with its additional category, highlights greater variance in results. That is, the differences between inner and outer regional are hidden by provisional in the 2006 schema.

Further findings pertinent to rural education research include, in both Model 1 (the 2006, 4-level schema) and Model 2 (the 2011, 5-level schema) the control variables of Catholic sector, Independent sector, total enrolment (very small effect), and attendance % associate with increased NAPLAN scores in literacy and numeracy. In both models, the control variables of Indigenous % and LBOTE% associate with decreased NAPLAN scores in literacy and numeracy. In both models, FTE associates with significantly lower numeracy scores, but the literacy scores only trend towards lower significance. Had we set a more liberal significance threshold, it would have been significant.

An American Example: Remoteness and Advanced Placement Access

Compared to Australia, the USA has few federal mandates for education (Savage & O'Connor, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the nation with 50 states that can uniquely make their own educational policies lacks a consensus for geographic definitional schemes (Arnold et al., 2007). The US federal government alone has recently used at least 20 schemes to distinguish rural places from other geographic areas (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). We used the US National Center for Statistics Urban-Centric codes, 12 categories based both on population and proximity to population centres. Despite a lack of the Urban-Centric codes' consistent employment in research studies and policy analyses (Longhurst et al., 2019), the codes continue to show a unique ability to add precision within place-based analyses of education data (e.g. Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Kettler et al., 2016; Thier & Beach, 2020). While our Australian story interrupts the default narrative of rural schools as sites of disadvantage—also a dominant thread in U.S. education research (Biddle & Azano, 2016)—our US data highlights the importance of unambiguously defining geographies to ensure that disadvantages are understood thoroughly, yielding more informed placed-based policies.

Method

In this analysis we merged the Urban-Centric codes from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, a public source, with the Advanced Placement Course Audit, a proprietary database co-owned by the College Board, which administers the SAT and Advanced Placement exams, and Inflexion, a nonprofit educational consulting group. The latter dataset details the number of

Advanced Placement courses that US public high schools offer in any given academic year.

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics created the 12-category Urban-Centric codes to refine the eight-category Metro-Centric codes, which remain in use despite being 40 years old (e.g. Donaldson, 2017; Koziol et al., 2015). The newer codes reflected greater partnership among federal agencies and enhanced global information systems. As we show in Table 8.6, the Urban-Centric codes include annually updated designations for cities and suburbs, each subcategorised by size—small, midsized, large—and for towns and rural areas, each subcategorised by proximity—fringe, distant, or remote from urbanised clusters or areas. Using the 12 codes we constructed five permutations (Thier et al., 2020), expecting meaningful differences in how each would frame an examination of school-level data: two different nonrural-rural dichotomies and three polytomous approaches, one each that included four, five, and 12 categorisations of the codes. We have italicised the names of each in the subsequent sections.

Approximating colloquial notions of a nonrural-rural divide, our *blunt dichotomy* represented the roughest geographic cut of US school data. In this first approach, all schools in cities (codes 11, 12, 13) and suburbs (codes 21, 22, 23), regardless of size, were nonrural. By contrast, town (codes 31, 32, 33) and rural schools (codes 41, 42, 43), both regardless of their proximity to cities, were rural, evoking sharp divides that an unsophisticated observer might bluntly use to distinguish ‘the city’ from ‘the country’. Critics could justifiably accuse the blunt dichotomy of neglecting rural complexities. Thus, we also constructed a second dichotomous approach to examine more contemporary views of a nonrural-rural divide in the USA (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). Our *post-sprawl dichotomy* delineated nonrural schools as those in cities (11, 12, 13) and suburbs (21, 22, 23), regardless of size, but also included fringes of towns (31) and rural areas (41). In this approach, the remaining four codes comprised a rural category: distant (32 for towns, 42 for rural) or remote (33 for towns, 43 for rural), accounting for the ongoing engulfment of exurbs that sit at the fringes of rapidly expanding US cities. We intended this approach to explore potentially meaningful distinctions within the rural category, while retaining an ability to differentiate schools according to many research consumers’ informal characterisation of nonrural-rural.

Our third approach, which we called the *superimposed quartiles* (city = 11–13; suburb = 21–23; town = 31–33; rural = 41–43), has been used in several prior studies of Advanced Placement access to quantify school differences. Provasnik et al. (2007) used a similar approach with the old Metro-Centric codes and Malkus (2016) did so with the updated Urban-Centric codes. Using groups from the coding schema that seem to be ‘intact’ might be appealing to some analysts. However, we call these quartiles ‘superimposed’ because they ignore within-category variation in communities’ sizes (Greenough & Nelson, 2015) or proximity to cities (Kettler et al., 2016), the latter blinding them to remoteness (Thier et al., 2020). Consequently, we developed our *proximity* approach, a fourth option that more faithfully reflects intersections of rurality and remoteness. In doing so, we assumed concentric rings around cities in a way that most closely approximates Australia’s 2011 schema, as we explored

Table 8.6 National Center for Education Statistics Metro-Centric and Urban-Centric Codes

Locale category	Metro-Centric subcategory	Descriptor	Urban-Centric subcategory	Descriptor
City	Large (1)	City/metro area; population \geq 250,000	Large (11)	Inside urban area & principal city; population \geq 250,000
	Midsized (2)	City/metro area; population < 250,000	Midsized (12)	Inside urban area & principal city; 100,000 \leq population < 250,000
			Small (13)	Inside urban area & principal city; population < 100,000
	Large (3)	Within large city/metro area; urban by Census	Suburb, Large (21)	Outside urban area & principal city; population \geq 250,000
Urban fringe/suburb	Midsized (4)	Within midsized city/metro area; urban by Census	Suburb, Midsized (22)	Outside urban area & principal city; 100,000 \leq population < 250,000
			Suburb, Small (23)	Outside urban area & principal city; population < 100,000
	Large (5)	Incorporated place; population \geq 25,000; outside city/metro area	Fringe (31)	Inside urban cluster; \leq 10 miles from urban area
Town	Small (6)	Incorporated place; 2,500 < population < 25,000; outside city/metro area	Distant (32)	Inside urban cluster; > 10 miles, but \leq 35 miles, from urban area
			Remote (33)	Inside urban cluster; > 35 miles from urban area
	Outside metro area (7)	Rural by Census; outside large or midsized city/metro area	Fringe (41)	Rural territory \leq 5 miles from urban area; \leq 2.50 miles from urban cluster
Rural	Inside metro area (8)	Rural by Census; inside large or midsized city/metro area	Distant (42)	Rural territory > 5 miles, but \leq 25 miles, from urban area; > 2.50 but \leq 10 miles from urban cluster
			Remote (43)	Rural territory > 25 miles from urban area; > 10 miles from urban cluster

earlier in this chapter. Both Australia's 2011 schema and our *proximity* approach for US data increasingly differentiate peripheral levels from urban centres. In Taiwan, Chen et al. (2017) applied a similar concentric ring concept to examine schools' urban proximities in that country. For the US data, we kept city and suburb groups intact and developed three other groups to encapsulate fringe (i.e. towns coded 31 or rural areas coded 41), distant (32 and 42, respectively), and remote settings (33 and 43, respectively). However, the proximity approach presented a limitation: it cannot account for subcategorisations based on size (for cities and suburbs) or distinguish potential differences between towns and rural areas. Therefore, our fifth and final endeavour, the *fully nuanced* approach, facilitated simultaneous examinations of size and proximity. In this approach, each category was one of the 12 Urban-Centric codes. As a benefit, this approach maximises the possibilities that the Urban-Centric codes afford. But a clear drawback is that the inclusion of so many categories might present more complexity than some datasets can handle or some analysts desire.

The criterion for the current study was the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses that a school received College Board authorisation to offer in the 2012–2013 academic year, which we selected for convenience. The 2012–2013 year featured records for $N = 14,200$ US public high schools, including 1,849 that offered no AP courses for that academic year (13.0%), but offered AP previously or subsequently. We could, therefore, naturally exclude about 2,000 high schools that had *never* offered AP courses; including such schools would have artificially skewed the data. After cleaning and matching data from the ACPA and the Urban-Centric codes in the Common Core, we retained an analytical sample of 12,943 schools. Our outcome offered suitable range: 0–33 in an academic year when 35 was the most AP courses that any school could offer, but no school offered all 35 AP courses. On average, schools offered 8.18 courses ($SD = 6.89$).

For the two dichotomous approaches, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests of their associations with schools' number of AP courses offered that academic year. For the three polytomous approaches, we conducted one-factor, between-subjects analyses of variance (Keppel & Wickens, 2004). To guard against our large sample size influencing tests for the first four approaches, we set $\alpha = .001$ with 99.9% confidence intervals. But our 12-level approach necessitated that we set $\alpha = .05$ with a 95% confidence interval to account for a naturally unbalanced design in which some locale categories had fewer than 500 schools and others exceeded 3,000. We compared results from the five approaches to determine the proportions of schools they classified as rural and to quantify the degree to which each approach might characterise 'rural' schools as relatively disadvantaged.

Our five approaches generated appreciable variability. Depending upon the approach to the Urban-Centric codes, the proportion of 'rural' varied wildly (see Table 8.7 for results from the first four approaches and Table 8.8 for the fully nuanced approach). When juxtaposing city and suburb (nonrural) schools against town and rural schools (both indicating rurality) in the *blunt dichotomy*, we could classify **about 48% of schools as 'rural'**. But that proportion fell to about 32% when using the *superimposed quartiles* to differentiate cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas as 'intact' groups. However, that approach also turned 'rural' schools into a plurality,

Table 8.7 Four geographic locale approaches to parsing advanced placement course-offering data

Group	Codes	<i>n</i>	Proportion	M	SD	99.9% CI
BLUNT ($\eta^2 = 0.21$)						
Nonrural	11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23	6,733	52.02	11.23	7.14	10.94, 11.52
Rural	31, 32, 33, 41, 42, 43	6,210	47.98	4.88	4.78	4.68, 5.08
POST-SPRAWL ($\eta^2 = 0.20$)						
Nonrural	11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23, 31, 41	8,981	69.38	10.23	7.00	9.99, 10.47
Rural	32, 33, 42, 43	3,962	30.61	3.53	9.79	3.02, 4.04
SUPERIMPOSED QUANTILES ($\eta^2 = 0.23$)						
City	11, 12, 13	2,927	22.61	9.79	7.30	9.34, 10.24
Suburb	21, 22, 23	3,806	29.41	12.33	6.81	11.97, 12.69
Town	31, 32, 33	2,019	15.60	5.40	4.33	5.08, 5.72
Rural	41, 42, 43	4,191	32.38	4.63	4.97	4.38, 4.88
PROXIMITY ($\eta^2 = 0.26$)						
City	11, 12, 13	2,927	22.61	9.79	7.30	9.34, 10.24
Suburb	21, 22, 23	3,806	29.41	12.33	6.81	11.97, 12.69
Fringe	31, 41	2,248	17.37	7.26	5.61	6.87, 7.65
Distant	32, 42	2,563	19.80	3.79 ^a	3.68	3.55, 4.03
Remote	33, 43	1,399	10.81	3.05 ^a	3.40	2.75, 3.35
Total		12,943		8.18	6.89	7.98, 8.38

Note Rounding might prevent proportions from equalling 100%. Superscripts indicate means were not significantly different during pairwise comparisons ($p > .001$)

exceeding suburbs (about 29%), and cities (about 23%), while doubling the proportion for towns (about 16%). But when we constructed a dichotomous approach that accounted for urban and/or suburban *sprawl* in our second approach, we found the ‘rural’ proportion to drop further to about 31%, making rural schools a minority group again.

When accounting for *proximity* , certainly a salient factor for access to educational opportunities in the USA, less than 11% of schools existed in remote areas. Roughly twice as many schools were in fringe (about 17%) or distant areas (about 20%). Last, the *fully nuanced* approach showed how accounting simultaneously for rurality and remoteness produced a rural-remote group that included only **6% of schools**. Thus, we found a wide range in how our approaches classified schools as ‘rural’, from as much as 48% to as little as 6%. So large a range portends grave implications for developing educational policy, unless one is content to misdiagnose place-based needs with a ‘one-size-fits’ solution.

Relatedly, we found evidence that our five approaches to the Urban-Centric codes revealed wide variation in the scope and scale of any place-based needs regarding AP course access (Table 8.9). According to our *blunt dichotomy* , ‘non-rural’ schools held an advantage of 6.35 AP courses over ‘rural’ schools, despite the amounts

Table 8.8 Fully Nuanced approach for advanced placement course-offering data ($\eta^2 = 0.30$)

Group	<i>n</i>	Proportion	M	SD	95% CI
11-City: large	1,591	12.29	8.40 ^a	7.25	8.04, 8.76
12-City: midsize	615	4.75	11.24 ^{bc}	7.26	10.67, 11.81
13-City: small	721	5.57	11.62 ^b	6.80	11.12, 12.12
21-Suburb: large	3,161	24.42	12.93	6.82	12.69, 13.17
22-Suburb: midsize	402	3.11	10.28 ^c	5.95	9.70, 10.86
23-Suburb: small	243	1.88	8.02 ^{ade}	5.72	7.30, 8.74
31-Town: fringe	479	3.70	6.56 ^{dfg}	4.61	6.15, 6.97
32-Town: distant	912	7.05	5.35 ^h	4.26	5.07, 5.63
33-Town: remote	628	4.85	4.60 ^h	4.00	4.29, 4.91
41-Rural: fringe	1,769	13.67	7.45 ^{eg}	5.83	7.18, 7.72
42-Rural: distant	1,651	12.76	2.94	2.98	2.80, 3.08
43-Rural: remote	771	5.96	1.79	2.10	1.64, 1.94
Total	12,943		8.18	6.89	8.06, 8.30

Note Rounding might prevent proportions from equalling 100%. Superscripts indicate means were not significantly different during pairwise comparisons ($p > .05$)

of schools in each of those two categories being roughly equal. Our *post-sprawl dichotomy* showed a marginally larger advantage for ‘non-rural’ schools (+0.35), but that approach categorised less than 1-in-3 schools as ‘rural’. Ultimately, our two dichotomies depicted a problem of roughly the same scale, but the potential scope of intervening in that problem could prove radically different depending on whether one perceived opportunity gaps that needed mitigation in 1-of-2 schools (*blunt dichotomy*) or less than 1-of-3 schools (*post-sprawl dichotomy*). Differing implications for planning and implementation are far larger than the denominators’ differences. School districts in many US counties would need to marshal considerably more resources if they aimed an equity-focused policy meant to augment services and address needs of half their schools rather than one-third of them.

Furthermore, our *superimposed quartile* approach revealed rural schools to be a plurality but showed a more pronounced rural disadvantage than the two dichotomous approaches. In this approach, AP course-offering in rural schools trailed their suburban peer institutions by an average of 7.70, exacerbating the rural problem by a full course when compared to the findings from our dichotomies. Moreover, when we incorporated *proximity*, we could more precisely locate the suburban advantage over town and rural schools that were distant (+8.54 AP courses) or remote from the fringes of cities or suburbs (+9.28 AP courses). Last, the schools that the *fully nuanced* approach most narrowly defined as both rural and remote occupied a proportion of schools that some policies might ignore at about 6%, but those schools’ degree of disadvantage was stunning: 11.14 fewer AP courses than peer institutions in large suburbs. Schools that were rural and distant also had a 10-course disadvantage when compared to large suburbs. Rural schools that were simply at the fringe of cities and

Table 8.9 Interpretation of rural/remote disadvantage: Proportion, effect size, and gap from lead

Approach	Rural/remote set of codes	Proportion	η^2	Disadvantaged group	Gap from lead group(s)
Blunt	31, 32, 33, 41, 42, 43	47.98	.21	Rural M = 4.88 SD = 4.78	6.35 APs < nonrural
Post-sprawl	32, 33, 42, 43	30.61	.20	Rural M = 3.53 SD = 3.60	6.70 APs < nonrural
Superimposed quartiles	41, 42, 43	32.38	.23	Rural M = 4.63 SD = 4.97	7.70 APs < suburbs
Proximity	32, 42	19.80	.26	Distant M = 3.79 SD = 3.68	8.54 APs < suburbs or 3.47 < fringe
	33, 43	10.81		Remote M = 3.05 SD = 3.40	9.28 APs < suburbs or 4.21 < fringe
Fully nuanced	42	12.76	.30	Rural: distant M = 2.94 SD = 2.98	9.99 APs < suburb-large or 4.51 < rural-fringe
	43	5.96		Rural: remote M = 1.79 SD = 2.10	11.14 APs < suburb-large or 5.66 < rural-fringe

Note AP = Advanced Placement courses

suburbs—those that most dichotomous approaches to US school-level simply force into a haphazard and broad bin of rurality held distinct *advantages* over rural and distant schools (+4.51 AP courses) and rural and remote schools (+5.66 AP courses). Evidently, the approaches we used to categorise schools had profound implications on how many ‘rural’ schools’ policymakers should focus on and how severely those schools might experience opportunity gaps, at least for the outcome of interest in this study.

Implications

The case studies outlined in this chapter have illustrated the value of paying more attention to classifications when cutting and grouping quantitative data pertaining to rural education. We have shown that the typical classifications, often used simply for ease, mask the particularities of rural education, while also erasing its potential successes. Similar stories from case studies in two nations suggest that this issue is not bound by national context. Instead, it would seem that the phenomena of grouping as erasing rurality is a symptom of metrocentric value systems (Roberts & Green,

2013). Indeed, such erasures—of rural educational success in the Australian case and the scope and scale of potential inequities in the US case—work to reinforce these metrocentric values by ensuring the centre maintains its control over surrounding regions through education (Green & Letts, 2007), analogous to Foucault’s (1978) argument on the use of statistics as a tool to control populations. The approaches to disaggregating data illustrated here can empower rural education researchers, and the policymakers who depend upon rural education research, to counter the dominant deficit discourse on rural schools. In doing so, they can help ensure rural educators are celebrated for their many successes and that rural communities receive the supports that are most useful for their actual needs.

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Chapter 9

Pathways, Principals, and Place



Melyssa Fuqua 

Abstract This chapter explores the work of pathways advisors and the ways they effect and are influenced by their place, then considers how these insights might inform the work of school principals. Pathways advisors assist students in planning and preparing for their life after secondary school which may include providing careers education, careers counselling, and/or assisting students in finding local work experience. This work requires deep understanding of place, particularly the social space of their communities. The work of school principals also requires a strong understanding of place to best inform their leadership and to support pathways exploration programs. The work of pathways advisors and principals are intrinsically linked to the particularities of their community—its people, economy, and geography—and this knowledge is built over time through extensive interpersonal relationships. The combination of local knowledge, careers and pathways information, and network of interpersonal relationships results in pathways advisors being in a powerful position in their communities. The advice they give and the support they are able to draw on for their students could have long-term effects on their communities. Informed by a narrative inquiry involving six rural Australian pathways advisors, this chapter reinforces the importance of educators understanding their local community and being actively engaged in it. While this research has significance for several fields of education, for school leadership, it highlights the importance of considering the extent of their staff’s understanding of place and the need to value development of local knowledge as a vital aspect of professional learning.

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Introduction

The consideration of place for educators'¹ pedagogy, and as a critical element of pre-service teachers coming to 'know' their community, has been explored in some detail across both the existing rural education literature and the broader field of education research. We know that educators' understanding of their place can affect their teaching, relationships, and local community itself (see Chapter 3). Utilising Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space, in this chapter I discuss some of the consequences if school leadership does not fully recognise or value the importance of educators' sense of place and offer recommendations to ameliorate this.

My consideration of principals and place centres on three main discussion points:

- understanding place to better inform the distribution of school resources;
- understanding place to bolster community sustainability;
- supporting local knowledge as professional learning.

In this chapter, I explore how the work of rural pathways advisors and the way they effected and are influenced by their community can be applied to the work of school leadership. Pathways advisors are a key source of information and support for students and their families, playing an important part in helping transition from secondary school to what comes next—employment, tertiary study, or traineeships. Exploring the role and work of rural pathways advisors is critical in a time when many rural communities are struggling with uncertain economic futures and persistent challenges. Pathways advisors are likely to be involved in the wider community as part of their work at school. In addition to teaching, their roles may include coordinating local Work Experience programmes and helping students find apprenticeships, and the advice they provide may influence students' decisions to stay local after secondary school or leave for other opportunities. Using these pathways advisors as examples, school leadership could develop practices that better reflect the relationships between place and education.

Conceptual Framework

Two of the key terms in this chapter—*rural* and *pathways advisor*—have varied and complex definitions. As a way to respectfully recognise the nuances of place, my use of the term *rural* is grounded in Reid et al.'s (2010) model of rural social space that considers rurality based on a place's unique demography, geography, and economy. My use of *rural* is not meant to be taken as simply not-urban, but rather one that is defined by its people—how people refer to their own place. The other keyword—*pathways advisor*—is used as an umbrella term to reflect the variety of titles and

¹I use the term 'educators' as an umbrella term for anyone working in a school or assisting in the education of children—this includes, but is not limited to, principals, teachers, and education support staff.

tasks the role might entail. For the sake of clarity, I use the single term because the more common titles—for example ‘careers advisor’ or ‘guidance counsellor’—does not indicate the true complexity of these roles and can vary by region/nation. Additionally, it is a role that can be performed by classroom teachers in addition to their teaching load, as part of a school leadership role, or by an education support staff member.

I use a conceptual framework comprised of Reid et al.’s (2010) rural social space model and Cuervo’s (2016) pluralistic understanding of social justice in rural schools. These models serve to shape the thinking around the study. Reid et al.’s (2010) conceptualisation of rural as a shared and unique space is complemented by Cuervo’s (2016) call for social justice in rural schools to be more nuanced necessitating an understanding of context. In essence, each rural social space has factors which enact or prevent the production of social justice, and socially in/just conditions mediate the rural social space. As they relate to pathways advising, rural social space concerns the local economy (jobs and employers), people (students and families), and geography (industries and distance to career exploration opportunities). The pluralistic sense of social justice encompasses distributive justice (resources and equality of opportunity), recognitional justice (understanding place and contexts), and associational justice (the need for participation in decision-making).

Rural Social Space

Reid et al.’s (2010) model reflects the interplay of geographic, demographic, and economic elements of rural places—it is meant to counter the deficit model of rural. They state that “rural social space is the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time” (Reid et al. 2010, p. 269). As a fluid construct that is unique to any given space or time, it requires ongoing engagement to understand it. They posit that teachers who understand their rural social space can tailor their pedagogy and develop relevant programs for their students. This underscores the argument that teachers and schools are vital to the long-term sustainability of rural communities. For a further elaboration on rural social space’s usefulness as a model of understanding places, see Chapter 3.

Social Justice

Cuervo (2016) argues that for there to be improvements in social justice for rural schools, there needs to be an understanding that goes beyond redistribution of resources. It requires a better understanding of marginalised groups through an increase in their participation in decision-making that affects them. Cuervo (2016) posits that there has been a lack of consideration for the impacts of place in distributive policies that tend to use an economic understanding of equity. While these policies

may seem straightforward on paper—send additional resources to the ‘disadvantaged’ rural—they are incomplete, ignore the uniqueness of each place, and position rural as being in deficit to “the cosmopolitan values of the urban elites” (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 765). The need to recognise the influence of rural social space in the social justice agenda is reinforced by Reid (2017) since “we always live in a more than social world: ... we live in places that have geographies *and* histories, and these matter” (emphasis in the original, p. 94). So, to improve upon the flawed policies based in an economic sense of distributive justice, Cuervo (2016) calls for increases in the recognitional and associational aspects of social justice. This means working towards a minimisation of the cultural domination of marginalised groups—in this instance rural educators—through more opportunities to participate in decisions that directly affect them. In as many words, he is asking policymakers to engage with the people who live in and know their rural social space about their needs, rather than make decisions for them based on an outsider’s perspective.

Mapping the Field

There are several issues key to understanding the influence of place on the work of rural pathways advisors—and so by extension, any teacher or school leader concerned with the successful transitions of students out of secondary school or the sustainability of rural communities. In terms of teachers being able to prepare students for life after school, the “intractable dilemma of rural school staffing” (Downes & Roberts, 2018, p. 46) in Australian and international contexts of the ongoing challenges of attracting and retaining staff (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Downes & Roberts, 2018) results in several issues that may affect student transitions including:

- delivery of a narrower curriculum with fewer specialist teachers;
- teachers being required to teach outside their areas of expertise;
- staff with less access to professional development, less support for students with special needs, the need for composite classes; and
- potentially high staff turnover rates.

With an acknowledgement that each school exists in a unique context, these challenges and opportunities remain trends in rural education research. The consideration of these issues is necessary because educators play a “critical role shaping the futures of students and rural communities. Teachers’ work matters because they reconcile top-down education policy agendas with the complexities youth bring into school” (Cuervo et al., 2019, p. 92). As Halsey (2018) argues in his report, “more has to be done to recognise the diversity of contexts, challenges and opportunities of leading and teaching in RRR [regional, rural, remote] schools and communities” (p. 6). He indicates that the lack of appropriate funding and support for rural schools is connected to the continuation of poorer results and outcomes for rural students. This incomplete, funding-orientated understanding of rural needs—the contextual needs of any community—shows a continued lack of understanding of the role of place in

education by policymakers (e.g. see HREOC, 2000). Context matters in education, so if policies continue to underappreciate the complexities of each place, that makes it all the more important for local educators to understand *their* place.

Stay or Leave? Student and Community Futures

The core business of pathways advisors centres on student transitions out of school. These transitions may also involve leaving town, which particularly in rural contexts, can have a profound impact on the community. Rural student transitions from secondary school are wrapped in concerns about their aspirations for work and further study as well as what effects their decision may have on their community. Student perceptions of their community and its future—developed by a multitude of factors including schools, teachers, and community engagement—can have dramatic impacts on their local town. As such, pathways advisors and principals should have an understanding of these complex issues.

The implications and factors contributing to the dilemma of staying or leaving for rural youth have been widely explored in Australian and international contexts from Corbett's (2007) seminal work in Canada through more recent work such as Cuervo's considerations of Australian youth (2014, 2016). Generally, if rural students choose to undertake further studies, they must leave their communities even if they would prefer to stay local. Rural students are "confront[ed with] an array of discourses and pressures about their role and needs in their post-school life and a series of structural limitations that make leaving their community not only their 'only' but their 'best option'" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 66). Pathways advising becomes not just a matter of exploring what students would like to do but also where they would like to be (Tieken, 2016).

The question of staying or leaving is a fraught one for students, families, and the community. In a time when many rural Australian communities are facing challenges associated with changing economics and demographics (Cuervo, 2016), sustainability—whether, and which, students stay or leave—becomes a significant concern. Perceptions around this choice are formed through a number of channels including the community itself, family, media, and cultural signals (Corbett & Bæck, 2016). It is possible that "small towns play an unwitting part in their own decline" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 24) if they do not look to engage with their students about their futures. Student opinions on the local labour markets and economic outlook are amongst the leading influences on the choice to stay or leave (Corbett & Bæck, 2016). As such, building partnerships between the school, tertiary providers and local employers can assist students to make informed decisions about their potentially local futures and strengthen their ties to the community (Woodroffe et al., 2017). Support from within the school to build such partnerships—beginning with the nurturing of a culture that encourages such engagements—depends on the principal.

Staying or leaving is also affected by prevailing conceptions of rural student aspirations. Concerns about raising rural student aspiration have become an increasingly

explored topic around the world (Hawkins, 2017; Tiekens, 2016), but the term itself can be problematic. Too often it is framed around urban norms and expectations, leaving teachers to negotiate the tensions felt by their students and communities (Cuervo et al., 2019). Cuervo et al. argue that this is a powerful position for teachers to be in because “at stake in teachers’ discourses, values and practices are the building of futures for young people and for rural communities” (p. 97). Corbett (2007) warns of the influence that language about staying or leaving—emanating from community members and school—can affect student decision-making. Often the ‘stayers’ are “cast as the losers” (Corbett, 2007, p. 9) who did not use their education as a ticket out of town to a more successful future. There is still “insufficient recognition of the validity of aspiring to remain in a rural community and how this sort of aspiration neglects the desire of many students and their families” (Cuervo et al., 2019, p. 90). This again can be linked to the tone and culture that principals encourage in their school.

Participation in tertiary study is often used as an indication of having high aspirations. Woodroffe and colleagues (2017) argue that “a number of factors related specifically to rurality influence rural people’s career and higher education aspiration and participation. Like most literature about rural education, these factors reflect a deficit view” (p. 160). The expectations around aspirations and tertiary participation are based on metrocentric norms—for example, many local employment opportunities do not require further qualifications. Corbett and Forsey (2017) reinforced the need for space and local culture to be considered when it comes to rural aspirations. The reality is that some students will want to leave and some will want to stay, but in order for them to make more informed decisions and develop personally relevant aspirations, rural students need to be exposed to a range of careers locally, in other rural places, and in non-rural places (Webb et al., 2015).

When rural students do choose to participate in tertiary study either at university or in vocational training, they are an underrepresented social group. They face significant barriers to participation such as difficulty transitioning from Year 12 and the distance and subsequent high costs of travel and living away from home (Cuervo, 2016). The barriers often lead to a deferment of the university offer (Polesel, 2009). However, when some of these challenges of access and distance are lessened to an extent by regional universities and vocational education training facilities, students benefit (Allison & Eversole, 2008; Johns et al., 2014). The relative success of locally based training and university options suggests that they are better able to meet the contextual needs of rural people and communities, highlighting again the importance of considering place in education.

The work of pathways advisors lays at the crux of many of these tensions, requiring them to have a solid, realistic understanding. Their framing of local and other career possibilities has the potential to exacerbate or mediate the rural “brain drain” (Corbett, 2010, p. 227).

The Study: Lived Experiences of Australian Rural Pathways Advisors

This chapter draws upon research conducted as a narrative inquiry (see Fuqua, 2019). The stories of six rural Australian pathways advisors were explored in order to consider the effects of rurality on their work. Participants were recruited through a convenience sample and were located in western Victoria. Their stories were generated through unstructured, conversational interviews in order to “provide an opportunity to prioritise the story teller’s perspective rather than imposing a more specific agenda” (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016, pp. 631–632). This was vital to ensure rural participants were heard and understood on their own terms. It also preserved the notion that each place was unique as were people’s perceptions of it. Their stories included descriptions of their role in and out of school, as well as their views on the challenges and opportunities they faced as rural pathways advisors.

The stories from the unstructured conversations were then written into re-storied narratives which were member-checked then analysed using Riessman’s (2008) narrative thematic analysis. This form of analysis considered each re-storied narrative as a whole. I looked for “novel theoretical insights” (Riessman, 2008, p. 74) about their sense of place and their work. These were based on a conceptual framework of Reid et al.’s (2010) model of rural social space and Cuervo’s (2016) pluralistic view of social justice in rural education. Each participant was considered individually in recognition of the uniqueness of place and individual perceptions. From the analysis of the individual narratives, I developed several overarching insights into the influence of place on the work of rural pathways advisors which I briefly discuss in the following section.

Pathways Advising and Place

The pathways advisors’ narratives reinforce the importance of educators (principals, teachers, support staff) understanding their local community and being actively engaged in it. The work of the pathways advisors is intrinsically linked to the particularities of their community—its people, economy, and geography—and their knowledge is built over time through extensive interpersonal relationships. Each advisor’s understanding of *their* rural social space shapes *their* approach to *their* advising role and, in turn, *their* advising role has the potential to shape *their* community. The combination of local knowledge, careers and pathways information, and network of interpersonal relationships results in pathways advisors being in a powerful position. The advice they give and the support they are able to draw on for their students can have long-term effects on their communities. There is also a need for better recognition from principals of the work done by pathways advisors.

Underpinning all of these, is the clear interconnectedness of rural social space and social justice. The *thisness* (Thomson, 2000) of a place—a notion developed out of

research conducted in outer suburbs that had “borne the brunt of ‘structural adjustment’” (p. 157) of declining industrialisation—is composed of its distinctive social space and social justice issues. *Thisness* is applicable across contexts. It emanated from urban/suburban research but has become an integral aspect of recognising the uniqueness of each place in rural research. Thomson (2000) states there is a need to consider local context before realistic improvements in social justice practice can be made. I argue that this intertwined relationship is important to understanding place—rural or elsewhere. Every social space has unique manifestations of social (in)justice, even when challenges are shared between communities. Subsequently, these unique manifestations of issues of social (in)justice in a community affect the social space. These nuances should influence how educators approach their work, so having a good sense of their place is required and should be supported by leadership.

Rural Pathways Advisors Need Strong Local Knowledge

In addition to the general, technical knowledge of careers counselling—such as various tertiary pathways or administrative requirements—pathways advisors need to have a broad understanding of their local area. Similar to Reid et al.’s (2010) argument that rural social space should inform pedagogy, pathways advisors need to understand their social space in order to ‘translate’ the technical aspects of their role appropriately for their context. The time and personal experience necessary to develop this local knowledge often is not well-acknowledged by principals, but it is valued over decontextualised professional learning (e.g. the more ‘traditional’ external professional learning activities) by pathways advisors.

The most important aspect of local knowledge that pathways advisors need is strong relationships across the community—in both a professional and personal capacity. As Emily², a participant stated, “We rely on relationships here. It’s all about the relationships”. These relationships form part of the interactional infrastructure which help to “build community social capital and ensures better matching of [local employment] needs with provision” (Kilpatrick & Loechel, 2014, p. 17) educational opportunities. It is through these relationships that pathways advisors keep up-to-date on aspects of the town’s evolving social space. This knowledge is required in order to provide appropriate advice to their students about local work futures and opportunities. These relationships also form the core of the local Work Experience programs, many of which “always rely... on the good will” (Maxwell) of employers. Pathways advisors are able to leverage their network of contacts in order to facilitate student placements with suitable employers. Programs like this in small towns may rely on favours between community members—for example to be an active participant in the program as an employer or for a workplace to take on potentially difficult students.

²All participant names are pseudonyms.

Not only does social space affect the work of pathways advisors, but their work in turn affects their social space. A consistent way that their work influences their community is through their perceptions and framing to students about local jobs or the need to move away. Their local knowledge and subsequent advice may influence who leaves, who stays, and who returns to town. Pathways advisors are in a position to mediate outmigration—a powerful position in rural communities—by exposing students to a variety of work futures that are local, in other rural areas, and in urban contexts. Sarah argued that students:

should be looking at a wide variety of different pathways to get into different jobs. It shouldn't just be... go to university or you need to go onto the farm. We should be catering it [advising] towards all ranges of students... We also need to talk about where the jobs are going to be.

Rural towns are often depicted as having dying economies and as places to 'escape from'. It strikes me that there are many urban areas that are similarly perceived, particularly areas with low socioeconomic status. So, pathways advisors—regardless of their urban/suburban/rural context—are positioned to positively impact on the future of their communities. Their mediation of outmigration is one of many keys to rejuvenating social spaces that may have traditionally been considered 'undesirable'. This mediation is done through relationships with employers as well as with students and their families. Pathways advisors need to have a positive, mutually trusting relationship with families for their advice to be meaningful. As with the relationships with local employers, these take considerable time and effort to develop and maintain. These relationships may be nurtured by being active in the community through activities such as volunteering and playing sport. This involvement and presence in the community demonstrates a commitment to the ongoing well-being of the town and its people. Emily attributed her "credibility" in the community to her active involvement in its social spaces. So, the pathways advisors' perceptions of their social space, their understanding of the needs and future of their community overtime, are vital to their ability to perform their role ethically.

Principals and Place

The research that has informed this chapter has significance for several fields of education beyond pathways advising, one of which is school leadership. The pathways advisors from my project can serve as an example of the reciprocal benefits of engaging with place and education through a recognition of their interconnectedness. As such, this research illuminates several compelling implications at the school leadership level. My research highlights the importance of considering the extent of staff's understanding of place and the potential influence of place on education. I also posit that developing and maintaining local knowledge is a vital aspect of educators' professional learning. Notably, this is not limited to rural schools—an understanding of place and community needs is beneficial in all contexts.

One of the more influential relationships discussed by the participants was the one they had with their principals. Many felt their principals misunderstood or neglected the pathways advising role—“the principal doesn’t really take much notice” (Nancy)—which had detrimental effects on how they were able to perform the role. Notably, others felt understood and well-supported—particularly Sarah whose principal had experience as the school’s pathways advisor. Analysis indicated a link between how well-resourced the advisors felt their programs were and how well the principals understood the demands of advising work. Many of the misunderstandings about the role have direct ties to the resources necessary to engage with the community. The misunderstandings may stem from poor communication—the responsibility of which does not lie solely with the principal to remedy, who, as Wildy and Clarke (2012) argue, already have a significant and wide-reaching workload. Blind spots in the principals’ knowledge about the nature of pathways advising and place have the potential to negatively affect the well-being of their advisor, the outcomes for their students, and the sustainability of their communities.

Understanding Place to Better Inform the Distribution of School Resources

One implication is that principals need to have a strong understanding of their social space to inform distribution of resources within their school. Policies aimed at providing a level of autonomy for schools means that it is possible to tailor programs to suit the school’s context, but also heightens the importance of principals needing to understand their place. This understanding is essential to prioritise funding and other resources—for example teacher time release or travel considerations—to programs that would be most beneficial to their particular students and community.

In order to fully develop such tailored programs, principals should also support their staff to be engaged in their social space. While many rural educators are often engaged in various aspects of their communities outside of school hours—for example through involvement with the local sporting club, volunteering, and/or connections through family and friends—this is not necessarily the case in larger towns where teachers may not live in the same community as their school. This is not to say teachers should be *required* to spend personal time in their schools’ communities, but that opportunities to engage with the community are incorporated into the school day. I explore this further later in this chapter, where I argue that developing and maintaining an understanding of local social space should be recognised as a vital form of professional learning. Educators need such an understanding to inform their pedagogy so they can assist in developing appropriate programs for their students. To use the pathways advisors as an example to illustrate how this might be enacted—most identified needing more time to visit employers during the school day. They used the time to nurture their professional relationships, learn

about industries and requirements, prepare for and support them through Work Experience programs, and develop other possible in-school partnerships. The pathways advisors viewed these relationships and their resultant outcomes as central to their work; however, many felt their principals did not appreciate the time necessary to maintain such relationships or disparaged the advisors for being off-campus during school hours. So, this meant a good deal of these professional relationships needed to be built outside of school hours, further blurring the line between professional and personal relationships in the small communities. “A lot of my stuff is done at IGA [grocery store], or the Post Office or just randomly in the street or at the hairdressers” (Emily) while other advisors described giving advice on the sidelines of their children’s sporting events and interrupted family dinners. A conversation between the advisors and their principals may be a way to clarify why “having a yack” (Maxwell) with a local employer during school hours was a necessary and productive use of time.

Understanding Place to Bolster Community Sustainability

Another important implication of principals knowing their social space are the consequences for community sustainability, particularly through their projection to students about the local future. While there is some disagreement in the literature about the extent of school influences on students’ decisions to stay or leave town upon finishing school (Petrin et al., 2014), principals can foster a school culture that celebrates opportunities yet acknowledges challenges to staying or returning to the community post-secondary school. This school culture, reinforced by the tailored local resourcing and employer partnerships discussed previously, will assist students to make informed choices about their futures. With a school culture, set by the principal, that seeks to be engaged with and understand the local social space, students can gain a better sense of their community, their places in it, and their potential futures. Students’ understanding of their community, and their sense of connection to it, can influence their post-school decisions (Cuervo et al., 2019; Petrin et al., 2014). This makes it important for the community’s future that the school supports and celebrates the students who choose to stay *and* those that leave, which means ensuring students can explore a variety of work futures. Such a task should not be left to the pathways advisor alone—one voice amongst many—rather it should be supported and developed across curriculum areas, necessitating principal buy-in and leadership. As Harmon and Schafft (2009) argue, it is the community and the school’s responsibility to “take collaborative actions that build community and strengthen positive results for all students to be successful... regardless of where they ultimately chose to live” (p. 8).

Supporting Local Knowledge as Professional Learning

Ultimately, these implications lead to the need for principals to encourage their staff—and themselves—to develop and maintain a strong understanding of the school’s community’s social space. As such, this knowledge and its acquisition should be recognised as a vital aspect of professional learning. Principals “need to appreciate that, right across the board if you want to have good relationships with community, parents ... you’ve got to support that. If you’re not going to support that, it’s not going to happen” (Maxwell). Several previous studies already identified that rural teachers want professional learning that is practical and relevant to their local area (CEP, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2011). It stands to reason this would be beneficial for educators in any context; Jenkins et al. (2011) state that “professional learning... should promote re-contextualised pedagogies that are sensitive” (pp. 80–81) to place. In order to effectively do this, educators must keep current on their understanding of their social space as it relates to education.

There are a number of ways this can be accomplished. One way would be to encourage more collaborations between the school and community. Woodroffe et al. (2017) saw the value of building networks across the community as a way to promote local careers to students, which should then have an ongoing positive impact on the community. Keeping the proverbial school gates open can also promote more active engagement and current knowledge of the social space by educators. This might be done through local employers coming into classrooms to assist in contextualising the curriculum to improve its local relevancy as well as educators taking students on local excursions. Another way principals could support their staff is to encourage them to participate in local/regional professional learning networks. The pathways advisors who participated in the study reported their regional network to be a crucial source of professional support as they were often the only person in their school focused on pathways. Nancy framed participation in such a network as a necessity, “You have to be part of that network. That’s where I learned how to do the job, what I had to do”. Additionally, they reported that participation, especially in the face-to-face meetings, was necessary to build their regional (rather than local to their community) social space knowledge and that meetings provided the space for a collective effort to ‘translate’ metrocentric policies into something relevant to their contexts. Finally, it is worth noting the practical benefits that when professional learning is based locally, it reduces the resources necessary for participating—for example travel time and costs, registration fees, or finding replacement teachers.

Closing Thoughts

I want to close by reiterating that it is in the best interest of all stakeholders in a community—educators, students, families, businesses, local organisations—to understand the social space they inhabit. Having strong, positive relationships

between the educational stakeholders results in them being mutually beneficial and necessary for the ongoing sustainability of communities. In the pathways advisors' narratives, the adage of 'it takes a village to raise a child' came through in that a whole-of-community approach was necessary for students to gain the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about their pathways futures. Central to this are the principals and pathways advisors—"the cog in the community" (Emily)—who can facilitate the relationships and manage the flow of information between stakeholders.

Place, and people's understanding of it, has a significant influence on the work of educators. A great deal of their work is based in the unique needs of their community, requiring a great deal of understanding of their place. Pathways advisors and principals have complex roles within their schools and communities. Both roles require a strong understanding of their social space locally and regionally; an enormous amount of trust and extensive networks of relationships in the community; up-to-date knowledge on topics that are constantly evolving and contextually-based; and are potentially powerful to the sustainability of their communities.

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Chapter 10

Can Boarding Be Better? Ethical Dilemmas for Policy-Makers, Education Providers and Evidence-Makers



John Guenther and Sam Osborne

Abstract Boarding schools have played an important role for much of Australia's colonised history. But in recent years attention has shifted to the role of boarding schools particularly for rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The Northern Territory Government's 2014 *Review of Indigenous Education* (The Wilson Review) supported boarding options ahead of local secondary provision for rural and remote students. Scholarship programs are often touted as the solution and while articulated policy on boarding is hard to find, financial support for boarding is not so hard to find. But what has been the impact of this growth in demand? How can it be that so little policy has resulted in so much activity and so much evidence of potential harm? This chapter argues from a theoretical position that the high hopes for boarding have often not materialised because of the hegemonic policy paradigms (or belief systems), which fail to take account of evidence, and which in turn have the potential to create ethically questionable policy. We also challenge researcher ethics in the 'site' of boarding. The lessons from this discussion extend to other sites or places and it could be that boarding is one place among many in the rural/remote context where these tensions occur. The chapter concludes by suggesting that critical consideration of the consequences of potentially unethical policy is the first step in moving towards ethically sound boarding provision.

Introduction and Background

Most of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lives in urban or metropolitan areas. However, while we do not deny the challenges faced by those living in cities, the focus of this chapter is on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in places outside of the main population centres of Australia—and

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particularly those young people who are left with little choice for education other than those offered by boarding schools. We are reluctant to describe them as 'rural and remote' because of the way these terms have been defined, often in metrocentric deficit terms by those living in the metropolitan centres (Guenther et al., 2015b; Kühn, 2015) reinforced by geographically bounded definitions of (dis)advantage (Guenther et al., 2013). Nevertheless, there are significant challenges confronting people living in relatively isolated communities because the metrocentric hegemony currently holds the power to make decisions and resource their own imaginings about remote Australia on behalf of remote Australians. These challenges have their foundations in historical racism and inequitable policy regimes that marginalise and impoverish people whose identity is embedded within 'place' (Somerville & Perkins, 2010).

Questions of race and inequitable policy cut across other areas of education provision, particularly for new arrivals from non-English speaking and culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds. For these groups, also described as 'disadvantaged', the choices on offer are often limited, not necessarily because of location, but because of their inability to access resources and break through the power structures that label them as 'others' and discriminate against them (Miller et al., 2018).

In spite of these metrocentric prescriptions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to live in places of so-called disadvantage. In many communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are custodians of land to which they have belonged for millennia (Marika & Ngurruwutthun, 1992). Traditional languages or distinct creoles are spoken at home, and ancient ceremonies continue to be practised (Purdie et al., 2008). The isolation then is an advantage rather than a disadvantage that needs mitigation, acting to protect the distinct values, knowledges and identities of people that are generated outside the locus of hegemonic power.

This advantage comes with a price. The price can be expressed in inequitable access to health and education services, in unequal distribution of wealth that comes from the land (e.g. from mining or pastoral activities), and in the difficult struggle to negotiate complex identities. Young remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in boarding schools must work between metropolitan views and oft told narratives of success and 'other' (Delpit, 1993) long-held family values of kin and relatedness, reciprocal obligation, traditional languages, law and culture, and connection to Country (place). Holding these tensions in place is sometimes described as being 'strong in two worlds', a simple and common phrase that offers great utility but also significantly understates the complex nature of identity negotiation that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people engage in to find their way in the world (Guenther et al., 2015a; Osborne et al., 2018).

The premise for boarding school education for rural and remote students is built on a hope that the aspiration of being 'strong in two worlds' can be achieved. But there is little independent evidence that it is being achieved. Despite increased research on boarding for remote students in recent years, much of what emerges raises concerns about negative experiences, racism, and failure of schools to adequately care for students (Benveniste et al., 2015; Bobongie, 2017; Guenther et al., 2016; Mander, 2012; O'Bryan, 2016; Osborne et al., 2017; Rogers, 2017), which we will turn to in

more detail later. These research projects are largely backed up by recent reports and inquiries initiated by the Australian Government, which detail instances of sexual abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), inadequate funding arrangements (Commonwealth of Australia and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017), “revolving doors” of students going in and out of institutions, and “devastating impacts” for students (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 117).

Beyond what we do know, there is still much we do not know about the outcomes of boarding. We are left to theorise what may or may not be the case (Guenther et al., 2020; Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). The intersection of boarding policy and the ethics of boarding programs is what this chapter now turns its attention to.

Policy Space in Which Boarding Operates for Remote and Rural Students

Boarding Policy in Historical Context

Boarding schools have had a place in Australia from about the 1840s, though the early engagement of Aboriginal children in institutionalised education is less clear (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Aboriginal peoples’ access to education did not become a priority until the era of Assimilation Policy (Hasluck, 1961), when schools for Aboriginal people were viewed as important instruments for assimilation. In the Northern Territory, boarding schools that were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s were intended to be “Transition College”s such that students were intended to “obtain the academic competence necessary to enter apprenticeships and technical training courses as well as para-professional or professional courses” (Russo, 1983, p. 2). While expectations might have changed in the last 35 years, the perceived role of boarding schools for Aboriginal young people is not that much different, and the policy discourse around them is still equally as fuzzy. The early thinking about boarding for remote students established a normative language about expectations which were anticipated. The anticipation of transition, however, has never really been checked against outcomes, and indeed the evidence of the effectiveness of ‘transition’ is still wanting. Meanwhile, ‘transition’ remains part of the discourse of policy thinking around boarding (Wilson, 2014) and even in academic thinking (Bobongie, 2017; Mander, 2012; Stewart, 2015), with some recent papers focusing more on how to better support transitions (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2019), rather than challenging the premise for transition, which is often related to inequitable access and ‘choice-less choice’ (Mander, 2012).

How Is Policy Constructed?

Bridges et al. (2009, Kindle location 795–799) point to four kinds of policy statements: those expressing collective intentions and providing aims or aspirations; those making rhetorical rallying calls; those providing rules that others have to follow or describing behaviours that others have to perform; and those indicating outcomes that have to be achieved. The problem with this definition is that policy statements are often not articulated as such. They can in effect be “discursive” where policy represents and refracts reality (Jones, 2013, p. 10). As such, policies are promoted and mobilised by groups depending on the discourses supported in the social context—and this is evident in the broad representation of ‘Indigenous education policy’ as Hogarth (2017) very neatly demonstrates in her unpacking of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014*. With this understanding, “government is seen as an ‘arena’, or a space, in which a range of political actors, all recognised as having a legitimate place at the policy table (stakeholders), interact to produce policy” (Maddison & Denniss, 2013, p. 7). Ideas that support policy are often framed as a response to a problem, built on paradigms (or belief systems) constructed to communicate normative truth. The paradigm is “influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole” (Hogan & Howlett, 2015, p. 85). Policy constructed this way demands little evidence because of the power of the paradigm in which it is implemented. This should not be taken to imply that policy resistance does not occur. It surely does, but Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) argue that resistance is not the opposite to power, and “does not sit outside power, meaning that forms of protest might also involve forms of complicity” (p. 112).

One might ask what all this has to do with the ethics of boarding schools. As we shall see later, boarding school policy is constructed with very little critique such that the paradigm carries its objects through powerful discourses. For example, when a prominent Aboriginal leader talks about boarding scholarships as “nation changing” (Pearson, 2014), he evokes a normative paradigm of what ought to be. When the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs says “The evidence of education and, as a consequence, employment outcomes achieved by indigenous children who attend boarding schools is indisputable” (Martin, 2014), he is creating an impression based on a normative belief system—there is no actual evidence to back up his claim. When a respected Aboriginal academic argues: “far from creating another Stolen Generation, it [sending students to boarding schools] would lift Indigenous communities out of poverty” (ABC, 2013), her role as an “expert in Indigenous studies” (ABC, 2013) gives credibility to untested assumptions about the role that boarding plays in poverty alleviation. When one of the leading Aboriginal boarding scholarship proponents says “Our first batch of children that started in 2006 they’ve all graduated now and starting uni or finishing uni and also in employment, and that’s a wonderful thing to see” (ABC, 2017), the discourse contributes to a normative hope that all children can and should share the same set of values and experience the same set of outcomes.

How do these statements then play out in government statements of policy? As an example, the announcement of a \$138 million policy package is prefaced by the statement: “The Government is investing in our next generation of Australia’s leaders by encouraging Indigenous students to dream; to have big, bold aspirations and to succeed” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). It should be noted that the ‘policy’ on boarding is largely tacit—there is no document that spells out what the government intends. But the funding (as an instrument of policy) acts to advance its ‘objects’ (in this case quality education) for its ‘subjects’ (in this case poor, disadvantaged, remote Aboriginal students), and does so based on the discourse, with all its normative assumptions—for example that Indigenous students do not currently dream, have no or small aspirations, and fail. In this policy context, scholarships to boarding schools (or also in this case, facilities run by football clubs) are seen as *the* means for students to access “quality educational opportunities” and support for residential facilities is meant to provide students with access to “quality educational facilities” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). It is as if there are no alternatives and the tacit problem will be solved through these means. Power (in this case supported by public funding) exerts influence to promote the belief system and create a tangible artefact of social policy (the Indigenous Year 12 graduate of the boarding facility) which in turn represents the discourses of the invested stakeholders. Whether it changes the nation, lifts Indigenous young people out of poverty, or whether they do go to university or gain employment is immaterial because the paradigm gives the impression that it does. It does so in much the same way that the continued discourse around ‘Transition’ as mentioned earlier provides a justification for implementing programs and establishing structures as a vehicle for achieving the unstated policy objectives they are meant to achieve.

What Does the Evidence Say?

Outcome for Individuals

Given the significance of boarding as a vehicle for access to education, it is not surprising that many contemporary studies report findings related to learning outcomes (Rogers, 2017), or at least aspirations (Bobongie, 2017; Walker, 2019). The studies also report that the experience they gain gives them a sense of independence and self-confidence (Rogers, 2017). Opportunity is another theme that emerges from the literature (Mander et al., 2015). However, whether opportunity translates into pathways to further education, as might be hoped, is questionable (Guenther et al., 2017).

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Several studies have examined the impact of boarding on resilience and well-being of students. Redman-MacLaren et al. (2017) suggest that transition to boarding school can lead to psychosocial stress. Mander and Lester (2017) concur, suggesting that “boarding students reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and stress at the end of Grade 8 compared to non-boarding students” (p. 1). Similarly, O’Bryan (2016) finds that attending boarding school diminished community social connectedness for many young people.

Identity and Culture

Several studies point to students being challenged with their identity because of boarding participation (Bobongie, 2017; Mander et al., 2015; O’Bryan, 2016; Rogers, 2017). The ideal of successfully living in “two worlds” (Benveniste et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2017) often evaporates into a vain hope (Hunter, 2015; O’Bryan, 2016). Redman-MacLaren et al. (2017) report that: “Students who transitioned back to community after... boarding school reported a lower sense of connection to peers and family, and... even lower resilience and psychosocial well-being scores” (p. 1). Mander (2015) also suggests that parents “worried that a sense of cultural disconnection may occur” (p. 178).

Families and Choice

Parent choice emerges in some of the literature as a key outcome of boarding. The question for parents is not so much whether to have their children board or not, but which boarding option should be taken (McCarthy, 2016). There is evidence that parents see boarding as an opportunity for their children (Mander 2015), but there is also evidence that many remote parents have little understanding of the realities of boarding school life, and are not making informed education choices for their children (O’Bryan, 2016). In a study examining access to boarding for young people from the southern region of Northern Territory, Osborne et al. (2018) highlight the importance of family support in securing access to boarding programs. They suggest the need for advocates and brokers, as well as flexible models for accessing and reengaging with both boarding and remote community schooling options.

Towards an Ethical Response to Boarding

The contrast between the discourses of evidence and the discourses associated with pro-boarding policies described earlier are stark. The paradigms with their accompanying discourses and instruments of power used to promote scholarships and infrastructure are seemingly at odds with the alternative paradigms which underpin the evidence.

The complexity of boarding policy and its implementation suggests a need for a critical dialogue with the hegemonic structures that ignore those who Apple (2017) describes as “absent presences” (p. 250) of an “other”, who might be considered as “irrational” (p. 251) (e.g. parents who want to see their children stay in community). And this is exactly what the research presenting the emerging evidence (discussed earlier), tends to do. The positions of evidence-makers could arguably be seen as representing these absent presences as agentic, resistant, resilient, and determined in their quest to preserve identities that are built on strong foundations of culture, law, language, and land. However, the dominant neoliberal narrative frames these absent presences as poor, failing ‘others’ who have not bought into the hope of the dominant policy paradigm which talks of opportunity, good education, experiencing other cultures, and ultimately getting a job (see, e.g., Osborne et al., 2017). Though, as noted in evidence, the hope is often not realised (e.g. O’Byran, 2016).

The evidence demands an ethical response—but not just an ethical response from policy-makers promoting products that have caused harm to the objects of their paradigm. There is also a need for an ethical response from the providers of educational products and from evidence-makers.

Research academics in universities are familiar with the need for ethical conduct. There are sets of guidelines for conducting research generally (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) and for work in Aboriginal communities (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012). There are ethical protocols and processes which must be followed before research can be conducted. The principles of ethical conduct are spelled out clearly in the NHMRC guidelines:

The relationship between researchers and research participants is the ground on which human research is conducted. The values set out in this section – respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, justice, and beneficence – help to shape that relationship as one of trust, mutual responsibility and ethical equality. (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007, p. 9)

There are similar principles of professional conduct and practice and decision making—for example, the tests for ethical decision making in the Australian Public Service are set out as:

- **Utilitarian**—increasing the mix of greater good while minimising the amount of overall harm;
- **Rights**—intrinsic respect for the human being to be treated as an end in itself rather than to be used or manipulated as a means to other ends;

- **Fairness or justice**—treated equally/equitably;
- **Common good**—contributing to society so that quality shared resources are available to everyone; and
- **Virtue**—development of individual character values (honesty, tolerance, courage, self-control, fidelity) (Godwin, 2009).

These tests are well-supported in the literature (e.g. Searing & Searing, 2016). However, the arena of public policy following Maddison and Denniss (2013) is not composed only of public servants. The statements we used earlier to illustrate the assumptions of the dominant paradigm on boarding policy came from a lawyer, an academic, a politician, and a philanthropist/activist. While the principles listed above might have varying interpretations in the critical analysis of public policy on boarding, it would be prudent to consider who benefits and who is harmed by policies that we know from the 2017 *Study Away Review*, have substantially increased demand for boarding places.

Unethical policy decisions can leave the implementers of policy (e.g. schools, hostels, support services) in a quandary. Do they take the money and make do with it, even though they know it is not enough to provide quality and safe educational experiences for young people? This is the position that many boarding schools are placed in as evidenced by the *Study Away Review* and an earlier report in the Northern Territory that examined the cost of boarding (KPMG, 2016) and echoed by many submissions in the *Power of Education* report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017). Then there is the issue of ‘churn’ also identified in the *Power of Education* Report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017) such that as many as one-third of students come and go from boarding schools in a year. Schools which exclude students are possibly complicit with a system that sets many students up to fail.

Researchers are also potentially complicit in the promulgation of unethical policy. It is quite possible for an institution to be given ethical clearance to conduct research which supports the unethical implementation of policies. For example, with strength-based approaches in mind, researchers may look for success factors or individual indicators of resilience. And yet while they are studying the success stories of the dominant paradigm, they run the risk of ignoring the failures, either in terms of the system or families and communities that suffer loss as a result of apparent success. In a similar vein, when research is designed to answer questions like: “how can transition pathways be better supported?” it runs the ethical risk of avoiding the harder questions like “how can the rights of a child to receive an education in his/her community be supported?” The former question is supported by the hegemonic bloc while the latter is not, and so the perceptions of the marginalised others are ignored or dismissed as ‘irrational’, while those who conform to the dominant policy paradigm are valorised as part of the process of “nation changing” (Pearson, 2014). We suspect this is not an isolated hypothetical issue. Researchers working within ‘places’ are sometimes pressured to position themselves either within or outside the place and therefore may find themselves in an ethical bind to position themselves either as rural researchers or researchers of the rural.

We have exposed potential ethical traps for policy-makers, education providers, and researchers in this chapter. As a first step towards an ethical response to boarding, there is a need for those who live in non-remote and non-rural parts of Australia—and often it is policy-makers, evidence-makers and education providers in this position—to be mindful of the ethical dilemmas posed here. We are not trying to apportion blame, but we are trying to make visible the otherwise invisible places and positions of ‘others’ who are the objects and subjects of policy, which arguably fails to stand the test of the evidence that has emerged or the need for ethical processes to be followed. The ethical traps we have discussed are of course not restricted to boarding school policy. They apply equally to other minorities and marginalised groups that do not fit the norm of Australian education (as if there were such a thing).

Conclusions

Having considered the policy environment, relevant theories and the evidence available on policies that support boarding for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, we return to the question posed in the title: Can boarding be better? This is not a question of outcomes or even a question of resourcing. It is an ethical question.

We have noted that a recognition of the power of discursive dominant policy paradigms to date has produced a lot of activity. That activity is met with some resistance and, as a result, the theoretical foundations of boarding strategies have failed to live up to their expectations—at least as far as the available evidence is concerned. These policy paradigms assume the inherent ‘good’ of boarding to lift people out of poverty, to provide pathways to employment, and to improve aspiration and opportunity.

However, without a critical assessment of boarding policy using ethical decision-making guidelines, the potential for harm will remain. An ethical response from educational and boarding institutions would require some tough decisions, for example whether to accept funding for boarding students when they know it results in inevitable student churn, racist or inequitable distribution of academic support services and resources, and where the ‘hope’ of boarding is just that—unable to be verified by independent evidence. Similar dilemmas apply to other schools which cater for marginalised minorities, such as non-English speaking new arrivals, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those from rural backgrounds. In each case, these schools have to represent themselves as ‘disadvantaged’ in order to access funding to cater for their needs.

Evidence-makers are not off the hook either, despite the requirements of university academics to undergo ethical clearance processes. Research that focuses on how to make Aboriginal people more compliant with the system and ignores the difficult questions about the rights of young people to an education in their own language and their own community, is rightly questionable from an ethical position.

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Chapter 11

Using Rural Education Research to Rethink Literacies Pedagogies



Robyn Henderson

Abstract This chapter considers how rural education research might inform literacies pedagogies. It begins by describing how researchers have mapped pedagogical approaches for teaching literacies and how there are consequences for using particular pedagogies in narrow ways. It also considers how, in the current competitive context of standardised testing, some education systems have required schools to declare publicly their pedagogical framework. Such moves seem to have resulted in a proliferation of narrow pedagogical approaches that are unlikely to be effective for all students. The chapter argues that rural education research—with its detailed and nuanced understandings about rural place and space—offers evidence to help open up particular pedagogical approaches to scrutiny and to demonstrate the importance of knowledge about place in selecting pedagogies.

Introduction

The field of rural education is embedded in the view that place matters. Although we might argue that this is a truism, the field has offered considerable explanation and discussion about how “the rural” is different from the urban, a conceptualisation that has often prompted a binary logic. As Donehower, Hogg and Schell (2012b) discussed, such logic has ensured “dualistic narratives, depicting rural places and people as lacking educational, economic, and cultural resources” (p. xi; see also Moriarty et al., 2003). In addition, these narratives have often masked or erased insights about the productive characteristics of those who live in rural places.

It has been recognised for a long time that there is crucial work to be done in trying to “reject the deficit model underpinning constructions of nonmetropolitan Australians as less normal and more problematic than their metropolitan counterparts” (Moriarty et al., 2003, p. 135). Indeed, in the light of the prevalence of deficit thinking, many researchers (e.g., Bartholomaeus, 2019; Green & Corbett, 2013a;

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Reid et al., 2010; Roberts & Green, 2013) have worked to turn around such thinking and to “reclaim the rural in productive ways” (Donehower et al., 2012b, p. xv).

In my own research, it was the prevalence of stereotypical and deficit stories about itinerant farm workers’ children and their families (Henderson, 2008, 2009) that prompted me to shape my later research around positive stories. This shift in focus—to go looking for evidence of responsive and flexible literacies teaching that effects transformative action in schools (Janks, 2010)—drew me towards literacies pedagogies as an important area to research. My thinking was shaped by a view that, if we want teachers in classrooms to make a difference to students’ learning, it is important to find out what is working, why and how. However, in building my understandings about literacies pedagogies, I concluded that researchers and school practitioners could learn from rural education research. One of the reasons for that is that rural education research has a lot to say about rural contexts and how understandings of place can make a difference.

This chapter explains my thinking about how an understanding of “the rural” can inform understandings about literacies pedagogies. I begin by sharing three incidents that prompted my initial thinking about rural education research in relation to literacies pedagogies. I then discuss how literacies pedagogies have been conceptualised and how the uptake of particular pedagogies warrants some rethinking. I discuss how rural education research might provide details about place, along with details about the lives of those who reside in particular places, thereby providing details that can impact on thinking about pedagogies, before returning to the three incidents and explaining briefly why interconnections between rural education research and literacies pedagogies are important.

Reflecting on Three Incidents

As already explained, three incidents prompted me to think about the nexus between rural education research and literacies pedagogies.

Incident One

The first incident was a research interview with the principal of a school in a rural area of south-west Queensland, Australia. The school was impacted by the current policy and practice context which demands the quantification of learning and ongoing comparisons with other schools (Gorur, 2016). Also evident in that context were what Cormack and Comber (2013) called “discourses of data” (p. 78) and a governmental push for “a stronger position on normative standards” (Comber, 2006, p. 59).

Indeed, the principal lamented that the high stakes assessments and associated talk about data put enormous pressure on her staff (and herself) in relation to meeting the education system’s expectations for continuous school improvement. However,

she felt that the pedagogy advocated by advisers from the education system—all of whom were based in an urban area and a full day’s drive from her school—was not working for the school and its student cohort. In relation to literacies learning and the school’s attempts to enhance student learning, she explained:

We were seeing gains ... particularly from our non-Indigenous kids. We still just couldn’t get that bang for our buck ... for sort of the rest of them. We were on that treadmill and never getting anywhere ... We were putting in a lot of time, a lot of work, a lot of effort into these kids and we just weren’t seeing the results.

As explained elsewhere (Henderson, 2020), the principal was frustrated by issues that impacted on her school as a result of its rural location. She was concerned about the cost of professional learning for teachers—because attendance usually meant being away from the school for several days due to the necessary travel—and the limited availability of relief teachers. She also felt that the pedagogical advice that she was receiving was neither meeting the needs of her school nor making a difference to the students’ literacies learning.

Incident Two

The second incident was when I read two booklets produced by a state education department (Queensland Department of Education and Training, n.d.; Queensland Government, 2016). These are examples of curriculum-related documents currently in circulation. The *Age appropriate pedagogies program: Progress report 2016* (Queensland Government, 2016) identified a plan for “championing high quality teaching and learning” (p. 4). However, despite attention to the complexity of teaching and considerations of child, teacher/educator, curriculum, assessment (evidence of learning) and pedagogy, along with acknowledgement of the importance of context and “school and community location” (p. 6), there was no mention of rurality or rural context. This seemed odd, especially since 72% of the schools in the programme were situated in non-metropolitan locations that included rural, regional and remote contexts, all of which fall under a rural umbrella (Bartholomaeus, 2019).

Incident Three

The third incident was a finding in my research on literacies pedagogies—that teachers are not always able to articulate their pedagogical approaches (Henderson, 2015). Other researchers have noted similar findings. For example, Comber and Nixon (2009) reported that when “teachers talk about their work ... they speak little about pedagogy, student learning and academic achievement” (p. 334). However, this does not mean that teachers are unaware of their pedagogical approaches. As Cochran-Smith (2012) pointed out, learning to teach occurs over time and should be

understood as a process, rather than as an event, that is influenced by background characteristics, experiences of initial teacher education, experiences of policy, and practice in schools, personal beliefs and values, as well as “multiple identities, positions, roles, and ways of knowing” (p. 121). This complexity is not always easy to explain or to share with others.

In addition, Comber and Nixon (2009) suggested that the absence of teacher talk about pedagogies is due partly to the demands of bureaucracy, the constraints of managerial discourses that have become so prevalent and the impact of a growing range of social issues that affect students, such as poverty, mental illness and feelings of alienation. In recent years, the push for data-informed practice in schools has made it difficult for teachers to be other than “the technicians and implementers of someone else’s curriculum and pedagogy” (Comber & Nixon, 2009, p. 344).

Considering Rural Education Research and Literacies Pedagogies

The previous section of this chapter outlined three incidents and their influence on my thinking:

- a principal frustrated by the way that systemic attempts to raise literacy levels seemed far removed from what was needed in her remote rural school;
- the lack of “the rural” in a curriculum-related initiative that was meant for rural schools as well as metropolitan schools;
- the apparent absence of pedagogical considerations in teachers’ talk about students’ learning of literacies.

These incidents suggested that a consideration of rural education research with literacies pedagogies would be helpful. That highlighted the importance of further investigations about literacies pedagogies, so this is the focus of the next sections.

Mapping Literacies Pedagogies

In considering the field of literacies pedagogies, it is obvious that there is a wide range. I reviewed some of the mapping of literacies pedagogies (e.g. Freebody & Gilbert, 1999; Freebody et al., 1995; Luke & Freebody, 1997b; Phillips & Walker, 1987). Over time, the interweaving of a diverse range of understandings about the learning of literacies—from the fields of psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, politics, English literature, educational assessment and human development—has resulted in what Stahl and Miller (1989) called a “continuous evolution” of literacies perspectives, beliefs and pedagogical practices (p. 89).

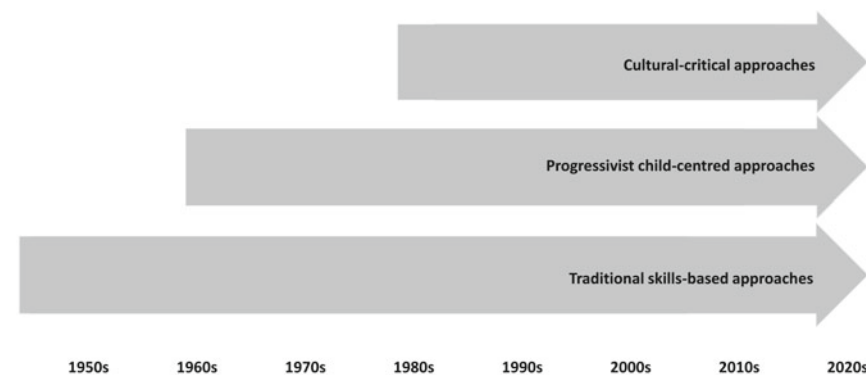


Fig. 11.1 The three clusters of literacy pedagogical approaches identified by Luke and Freebody (1997b)

Different researchers have conceptualised this variability in different ways, resulting in a range of frameworks that have tried to map different pedagogies for teaching literacies. I have chosen here to talk about one of these, from the work of Luke and Freebody (1997b). What I like about their mapping is that it attempted to account for a historical perspective, as well as some of the shifts across domains, such as the move from psychological to sociological models of literacy. Luke and Freebody (1997b) identified three clusters of approaches to literacies pedagogies. I have used Fig. 11.1 to visually represent the three clusters—traditional skill-based, progressivist child-centred and cultural-critical approaches—with a rough indication of when they originated and how they continue to coexist in the present.

The first cluster of approaches, traditional skills-based approaches, includes the basics-plus-classics model of literacy education, where some students were educated in the basics—“word recognition, hand writing, spelling, and reading aloud”—while others received the basics along with “exposure to a canon of valued literature” (Luke & Freebody, 1997b, p. 186). Later developments saw a growing interest in behavioural psychology and a move towards a view of the reader as a “psychological entity” (p. 188), thus reading instruction involved the mastery of sequences and hierarchies of skills, with basal readers for beginners providing controlled vocabulary and increasing levels of textual difficulty. In pedagogical terms, skills-based approaches to literacy tend to utilise direct and prescriptive teaching, thus representing a view that literacy requires sets of particular foundational knowledges and skills (Comber & Cormack, 1995; Ivanič, 2004).

The second cluster of approaches, those described as progressivist and child-centred, appeared around the 1960s, particularly because of new understandings from cognitive and developmental psychology. This moved the focus away from the skills-based approaches and their preoccupation with “the breaking down of the language into its various parts” (Christie 1990, p. 15), towards conceptualisations of reading as “the construction of meaning in the internal cognitive space of

the reader” (Luke & Freebody, 1997b, p. 189). This cluster incorporates experiential, whole language, process writing, growth, language-experience and cultural heritage approaches (see Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Goodman, 1986; Graves, 1981; Smith, 1983). In general, the focus was on active constructions of meaning in authentic meaningful contexts for reading and writing. Such approaches emphasise that children should be immersed in language and print resources.

The third cluster of approaches identified by Luke and Freebody (1997b) includes those based on sociological, cultural and critical understandings, with literacies recognised as social practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Luke, 1991). These emphasise the sociocultural contexts of literacies, highlight their political aspects, and thus recognise that literacy practices always take place in social situations and cultural contexts and involve cultural knowledge, ideologies and social power (Freebody et al., 1995; Ivanič, 2004). From this perspective, literacy is a multiple concept—hence the plural term, *literacies*—while learning is about access to, and participation in, particular social and cultural practices. School literacy success, then, is influenced by the extent to which students display culturally-preferred ways of talking, listening, reading and writing (Comber & Cormack, 1995; Luke & Freebody, 1997b).

This move away from unidimensional definitions of literacy (as per the other two clusters of approaches) accompanies a recognition that literacies education draws on selective traditions of what is accepted as literacy. Literacies education, therefore, is understood as a “normative social and cultural project” that constructs particular versions of the literate student (Luke & Freebody, 1997a, p. 6).

I want to make it clear, however, that Luke and Freebody’s (1997b) mapping does not suggest that literacy approaches can be organised into a tidy, sequential order that explains literacy learning, or that more recent approaches have replaced older ones. In fact, Luke and Freebody discussed the accumulation of understandings over time and the way that multiple literacy beliefs and pedagogical practices coexist. This is indicated in the visual representation of Fig. 11.1. Indeed, teaching practices are often based on aspects of all three clusters, so that “remnants from all of these ... are sustained in most contemporary classrooms and lessons” (Luke & Freebody, 1997b, p. 191; see also Freebody & Gilbert, 1999), with teachers seeming to take an eclectic approach or drawing on “hybrid instantiations” of various approaches (Ivanič, 2004, p. 240). That is, new approaches have tended to join, rather than replace, existing perspectives.

Understanding the Effects of Different Pedagogical Approaches

As has already been stated, the evolution of the three clusters of approaches to literacies teaching did not result in new approaches replacing previous ones. As a result, a wide range of different and hybrid understandings about what literacy is

and how it should best be taught is evident in the literature as well as in classroom practice. Indeed, the education system documents discussed in Incident Two at the beginning of this chapter indicate some of this diversity.

In the last couple of decades, there have been many calls for balanced approaches to the teaching of literacies. This has come from recognition that particular pedagogical approaches can play out in particular ways or, as Hamilton (1999) suggested, “entail different outcomes” (p. 148). Luke (2003) highlighted this when he talked about schools taking up particular programmes and how this can skew literacies outcomes. He gave the specific example of a school that “declared itself with full parental support a ‘basics’ school, committed to phonics, word study and quota spelling” (p. 69). The outcome was that “the kids could spell really well” (p. 69), but they were not doing well in other areas of literacy, such as reading comprehension and writing. As Luke explained, this was an “unbalanced program” (p. 70).

Considerable research calls for the balanced teaching of literacies, particularly to ensure that literacy instruction incorporates the full range of literacy practices: code-breaking, semantic, pragmatic and critical practices (e.g. Frey et al., 2005; Heydon et al., 2004; Kalantzis et al., 2016; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Rasinski and Padak (2004) highlighted that programmes that “combine aspects from more than one theoretical or conceptual framework have been found to result in positive learning outcomes” (p. 92), while Kalantzis et al. (2016) stressed that “excellent pedagogy has always involved a balanced and appropriate mix of activity types” (p. 74).

With these arguments in mind, let us return to the clusters of pedagogical approaches described by Luke and Freebody (1997b). Although the traditional skills-based and progressivist child-centred approaches conceptualise literacy teaching in different ways, they both focus on the cognitive, psychological and social differences that exist amongst students. As a result, failure to learn literacies can be readily located in individual children or in their family or home backgrounds. This conceptualisation of literacy underachievement has allowed deficit discourses to become a common-sense way of explaining why literacy learning is not happening. When the focus is on deficiencies, stories of blame often become taken-for-granted explanations, with blame ascribed to children and/or their families for individual learning problems, knowledge gaps, or impoverished home or social backgrounds.

Such a view—“a deficit gaze”—has consequences (Dudley-Marling, 2007, p. 7; Henderson & Woods, 2019; Woods, 2019), particularly in relation to teachers’ decisions about suitable pedagogical practice. When there is a perceived deficit, compensatory measures seem to provide an appropriate way to top up students’ knowledge and skills, thus (supposedly) fixing their literacy problems. However, such thinking can lead to further unintended consequences, including narrow approaches to curriculum and “an over-reliance on teaching basic low-level skills” (Woods, 2019, p. 212).

This is not a new point of view. More than 25 years ago, Cambourne (1992) highlighted the consequences of deficit views: “one simply takes steps to ensure that the learners who are deficient are given a large dose of whatever it is that they’re deficient in” (p. 61). In addition, because compensatory approaches are focused

on individual students, there is no interrogation of the structures and characteristics of school, schooling and the wider community and how these might influence students' learning. However, in contrast to compensatory thinking, the third cluster of pedagogical approaches—the cultural-critical—offers a perspective that recognises literacies as social and cultural practices and therefore considers context. This perspective focuses on “the particular texts, discourses, and practices” which students can access. It emphasises “standpoints, cultural expectations, norms of social actions and consequences” (Luke & Freebody, 1997b, pp. 208–209).

The cultural-critical cluster, then, widens the lens that teachers use and helps to show that “those resources and practices that children bring to classrooms are cultural resources, and not idiosyncratic individual differences, learning styles, skill deficits, or innate abilities” (Luke & Freebody, 1997b, p. 195). Widening the view and looking at the overall picture relating to student learning is a useful strategy to prevent a focus “on one small section to the neglect of others” (Henderson & Woods, 2019, p. 242). Indeed, such a wide lens is helpful for moving beyond the deficit understandings and stereotypical assumptions that so often accompany the common-sense logic of compensatory approaches.

Putting Pedagogies on the Public Record

Since the late 1990s when Luke and Freebody (1997b) provided their account of how literacies pedagogies have changed over time, there have been many attempts to draw together different pedagogical approaches to inform the teaching of literacies. These include The New London Group's (1996) seminal paper on a pedagogy of multiliteracies and the related work of Cope, Kalantzis and others (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Kalantzis et al., 2005, 2016). Without going into detail about these approaches, it is suffice to say that they have taken into account that different pedagogies have different outcomes and limitations, and they have attempted to include a range of pedagogical approaches, as a way of capitalising on the strengths of each. As The New London Group explained, the four components of pedagogy in their model do not represent a hierarchy and are not stages to be followed in a predetermined order. Instead, teachers should interweave the components to be responsive to students' learning needs. In this way, the components “may occur simultaneously, while at different times one or the other will predominate, and all of them are repeatedly revisited” as required (The New London Group, 1996, p. 85).

While these more recent models have drawn together features of all three of the pedagogical approaches identified by Luke and Freebody (1997b), we need to ask:

- What literacies pedagogies seem to be evident in schools currently?
- Have education systems, schools, policymakers and teachers used recent understandings about pedagogies and their consequences to inform their selection of pedagogies?

In Queensland over recent years, there has been a push for schools to identify, and make publicly available, their pedagogical framework as a way of demonstrating what schools are doing to ensure quality teaching. This has been particularly the case with government schools which are required to “implement and monitor the use of an agreed, research-validated, school-wide pedagogical framework” (Queensland Government, 2019, p. 2). To gain a picture of the frameworks prepared by schools in Queensland, I conducted a Google search. I decided to examine the first 20 frameworks for Queensland schools produced by that search. My reason for investigating only one state was to be consistent with the context that had informed the three incidents at the beginning of this chapter.

My review of the 20 pedagogical frameworks revealed that 17 of the 20 schools identified explicit teaching as the school’s pedagogy, with the majority of those schools citing the work of Archer and Hughes (2011) as informing their practice. Some of the schools framed their approach with statements like “our students learn through drill and skill”, a statement that resonates with the traditional skills-based approaches described by Luke and Freebody (1997b). Of the three remaining schools, one referred only to learning, not to teaching; one named Productive Pedagogies (Education Queensland, 2000) and the other identified Marzano’s (2007) art and science of teaching, while also highlighting explicit teaching as one of its differentiation strategies. In these three schools, it seemed that a multifaceted approach to pedagogy was preferred, rather than a narrow approach.

Although explicit instruction is a necessary component of an effective pedagogical approach (Kalantzis et al., 2005; Luke, 2014; The New London Group, 1996), a focus only on explicit teaching—as was evident in 17 of the 20 frameworks—is of concern. This is because explicit instruction is based on “clear behavioural and cognitive goals and outcomes” (Luke, 2014, p. 1) and it usually does not consider the way that becoming literate is a process “embedded in social, cultural and material contexts” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 82).

In the current educational context in Australia, where schools are pressured to improve their students’ results on the national literacy and numeracy tests, known as NAPLAN (see Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2019), and to be competitive with other schools (Woods, 2019), such narrow pedagogical responses are probably not unexpected. In general, there is a sense that the stated pedagogies of most schools are characterised by what Hamilton (1999) called “short-termism”, where the more strategic question about what students will become as a result of their education has been replaced by a simpler (and narrower) question, “What should they know?” (p. 136).

Nevertheless, I recognise that my review of school pedagogical frameworks was limited. I looked only at the first 20 identified by a Google search and my discussion is around the “stated” pedagogies, not those that might be in actual use in the classrooms of those schools. At the same time, I am mindful that the regulation of schooling and an associated shift to narrow approaches are not exclusive to Queensland, or to Australia for that matter. Rather, they are part of a global trend in schooling and even childcare (e.g. Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015). The promotion of NAPLAN as a measure of supposed school and teaching quality has been recognised by many

researchers as a major influence on classroom practice. Indeed, researchers have reported a dominance of teacher-centred pedagogies, reduced emphasis on higher order thinking and authentic assessment (Thompson, 2016) and, according to Gorur (2016), the promotion of what seems an “impoverished ... version of the very complex phenomenon of schooling” (p. 41).

While such shifts towards narrow views of literacy and narrow approaches to teaching literacy in schools seem often to have resulted in one-size-fits-all approaches, research has demonstrated that successful literacies teaching must involve a “complex integration” of pedagogical components (The New London Group, 1996, p. 83; see also Kalantzis et al., 2016). Indeed, the shaping of pedagogies across the multifaceted components of literacies teaching has been found to make a difference in classrooms (e.g. Comber & Kamler, 2004; Flynn, 2007; Kalantzis et al., 2005). As Comber and Kamler (2004) emphasised, teachers have a critical role in examining the effects of their pedagogical approaches on the students in their classes and on their learning. In view of my review of schools’ pedagogical frameworks, albeit a rather limited review, the current dominance of explicit teaching as the only “recognised” pedagogy of many schools is of utmost concern.

How Might Rural Education Research Contribute to Literacies Pedagogies?

The recent moves by at least one education system to promote the role of pedagogies in literacies teaching—as described above—seem sensible. However, in the light of accountability agendas that have pressured schools to “name” their pedagogical practices and the unintended negative consequences of narrow approaches to pedagogy, the field of literacies pedagogies seems to be facing some serious challenges. It would certainly seem easier to name narrow approaches rather than complex ones. How, then, might we tease out such issues and offer schools and teachers ways of moving forward, to meet systemic requirements but to simultaneously ensure that their approaches to pedagogies are going to be effective? This is where rural education research could play an important role. In teasing out the importance of place in education and providing detail about particular contexts, rural education research has much to offer literacies pedagogies.

Broadly, rural education research, with its focus on place, place-consciousness and place-based education, advocates using the community and environment in which a school is located as a starting point for student learning (Bartholomaeus, 2019). As Sobel (2005) noted, place-based education’s emphasis on “hands-on, real-world learning experiences” is useful for increasing academic achievement across the curriculum and helping students become active citizens (p. 7). Similarly, Greenwood (2009) argued that place-consciousness provides “a frame of reference” (p. 1). In the case of literacies pedagogies, such a frame can facilitate and contribute to considerations about how pedagogies, and schooling more generally, might work

to achieve much broader educational goals than, for example, being successful at moving through schooling (Queensland Government, 2019) or producing high results on NAPLAN tests.

Many rural education researchers have advocated for understandings about place to inform learning, especially to benefit rural students and those in marginalised communities. This has included the use of place-based learning activities to engage and motivate students (Bartholomaeus, 2019) and the inclusion of place-based education in initial teacher education as a way of preparing pre-service teachers for rural placements (White & Reid, 2008). Other researchers, however, have taken a wider view. They have considered the potential of understanding place in terms of overarching educational goals. Gruenewald and Smith (2010), for example, highlighted the potential to build students' dispositions, understandings and skills to foster "responsible community engagement" (p. xvi), to act ethically (p. xxii), to make "contributions to their communities that are valued by others and that promise to improve people's lives" (p. xviii) and to "regenerate and sustain communities" (p. xvi).

While such goals might seem a long way from pedagogies, one of the main points I want to make here is that rural education research provides detail that can raise questions about the disconnect between what research is saying about pedagogies (i.e., that an integration of pedagogies is important) and the narrow pedagogies being cited as school practice. In addition, rural education research can help us interrogate our choices of pedagogies. For example: How does a particular pedagogy take notions of place into consideration? What are the enablers and constraints of using a particular pedagogy when we know details about "this place" and its community?

Understandings about particular places and their communities open the way for scrutiny of the deficit discourses that are often in circulation. Through insights into the social practices of particular communities, including literacy practices, what community members do and the practices children bring to school can be understood as assets, rather than as deficits. A small teacher-research project conducted by Comber and Kamler (2005) demonstrated the power of knowing about students' literacies in their homes and how that knowledge impacted on teachers' actions. Such knowledge can make a real difference to teachers' decisions about pedagogies, not only for selecting pedagogies but also for understanding the effects of different pedagogical approaches.

In particular, such understandings are important for countries like Australia, where so many schools are located in rural, regional and remote areas. However, they are also useful for thinking about whether the literacies pedagogies that are in use in schools in marginalised communities, including those located in cities, are doing the type of pedagogical work that needs to be done. In teasing out the characteristics of place, rural education research contributes to knowledge about the complexity and heterogeneity of communities. These details can bring "an awareness of complicated histories" and allow deeper understandings of "continually changing, nuanced, context-dependent realities" (Donehower et al., 2012a, p. 5). Thus, rural education research can contribute detailed accounts of the types of experiences and traditions that students bring to school and link them to an understanding of what it means to be literate in rural as well as metropolitan locations.

As highlighted by Roberts (2017), rural education research “puts the perspectives, knowledges, and understandings of rural peoples at the forefront of the research” and shows the need, indeed the necessity, to shift from an embedded, and often invisible, metro-centric position in order to counter rural marginalisation (p. 57). Although rural education research has often dealt with policy and curriculum issues (e.g., Reid, 2017; Roberts, 2017), such studies also have the potential to open pedagogies to scrutiny and to show how places have “geographies *and* histories, and these matter” (emphasis in the original, Reid, 2017, p. 94). They matter not only to enable a more socially just education, but also to interrogate the effects and consequences of particular pedagogical approaches.

Indeed, some rural education research has offered specific examples of, and insights into, rural communities (e.g., Baca, 2012; Guenther et al., 2015; Corbett et al., 2017). This research might be used to shift views of literacies pedagogies away from narrow stereotypical perspectives, thus demonstrating why one-size-fits-all pedagogical approaches are not appropriate. By exploring “the conditions of the rural” (Roberts, 2014, p. 135), rural education research highlights “the particularity of the rural life-world” (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 770) and the “thisness” of rural communities (Thomson, 2000, p. 151). This foregrounding of rural place, space and location (Green & Reid, 2014) offers a way into questioning tacit assumptions about metro-centric norms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how researchers of literacies have mapped different pedagogical approaches and elaborated the consequences of some approaches. Research has emphasised that effective pedagogy requires a complex shaping (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Flynn, 2007; Kalantzis et al., 2005, 2016) and should incorporate a wide perspective that moves beyond narrow common-sense views based on deficit understandings of students (Henderson & Woods, 2019).

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the adoption and promotion of particular pedagogical approaches in schools—in many cases endorsing learning via pedagogy that almost exclusively encourages explicit teaching or narrow skills-based approaches—may in fact be counterproductive (Cormack & Comber, 2013; Woods, 2019). In trying to find a way of dealing with such challenges, I am suggesting that rural education research offers detailed and nuanced understandings that highlight the diversity of rural place and the different ways that rurality is manifested and constructed (Green & Corbett, 2013b). I am suggesting, therefore, that input from rural education research may help to open up pedagogical approaches and their consequences to a rethinking. In particular, the following points provide a starting point for dialogue between those interested in rural education research and those for whom literacies pedagogies are part of daily work:

- the importance of place in education, including literacies education;
- how the study of place can provide detailed information about the experiences and traditions that students bring to school;
- how pedagogical choices are often based on particular assumptions, sometimes stereotypical assumptions, about students;
- how understandings of place can question the deficit discourses in circulation;
- why narrow pedagogies might have negative consequences.

Understandings from rural education research assist in the foregrounding of complexity, diversity and heterogeneity, by shifting the focus away from metro-centric perspectives (Green & Corbett, 2013b; Moriarty et al., 2003; Roberts, 2017) and offering a wider view that is likely to facilitate more effective and equitable outcomes. What is suggested here is a bringing together of knowledge about the rural and understandings about literacies pedagogies, to enable a rethinking of pedagogies for the teaching of literacies.

To conclude, I would like to return to the three incidents that prompted my exploration of this topic. For the principal in Incident One, an exploration of place-based pedagogy and place-consciousness has the potential to offer ways of tailoring pedagogy for her school. Possible solutions to the challenges she identified lie not in either-or solutions, but in melding ideas from rural education research with the pedagogical recommendations offered by the system, to find an approach that will work for all of the students, not just a select few.

In Incident Two, the cited documents would benefit from a consideration of the relationship between place and pedagogy. The documents contain no mention of the rural, despite almost three-quarters of the schools being located in rural areas. The key question might be: How does knowledge about place inform decisions about pedagogies?

Finally, Incident Three, which referred to my research finding about teachers' inability to talk about pedagogy, hinted at the importance of giving teachers time and space to consider, reflect, talk and review their pedagogical approaches and the use of those pedagogies in their particular context. I am reminded here of Comber and Kamler's (2004) words that "There is, however, no simple 'happily ever after'" (p. 308). Solving the challenges of literacies pedagogies will never have a single definitive solution when we are talking about schooling in multiple and varied contexts, but taking rural education research into consideration seems to be a step in the right direction for understanding the diversity, heterogeneity and complexity of different contexts, and for recognising that these factors should be considered in relation to pedagogies.

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Chapter 12

How Can Rural Education Research Make Inclusive Education Better?



Julie Dillon-Wallace

Abstract This chapter discusses how rural education research can inform effective inclusive pedagogies, for *all* children with additional needs. It starts by explaining the binary that exists between metro and rural education and foregrounds the strengths and benefits of teaching inclusive programmes in rural contexts. New ways of considering research are presented by way of adapting theoretical frameworks, challenging deficit models, and embedding socioecological perspectives within the notion of *place*. Positive elements of inclusive practice in rural settings are drawn from previous studies, and this chapter illustrates what authentic “success” may look like in these contexts. Implications for researching in rural contexts using strengths-based methodologies are highlighted, as an important principle when promoting effective, inclusive education for all Australian children.

Introduction

Conducting educational research in rural settings can be challenging and complex, especially when it involves comparing and contrasting educational outcomes of those students living in rural contexts, with their metropolitan counterparts (Arnold et al., 2005; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). Tensions have led researchers to question what is particular to rural education research, and debates have arisen around the use of effective methodologies that reflect crucial markers and outcomes for students being educated in these settings. As a reorientation of these debates, Howley et al. (2005) urged researchers to question what was most worthwhile in rural education. At the same time, Arnold and colleagues (2005) called for a new agenda for this developing field, which has the potential to consider alternative, positivist approaches to research in rural schools as a pathway to understanding achievement scores for rural students. However, this position remains problematic in that rural education is vulnerable to deficit models, and using measures which reflect metropolitan contexts further places rural contexts on an uneven playing field.

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O'Neil (2013) emphasises that in a data-driven world, examining what gets taken up as a measure of success becomes important. Certainly, we are in an age of standardisation, where accountability and quality are linked to testing and assessment. However, whilst this often employs statistical measures, such measures may in fact ignore some important nuances of success of rural schools, and consequently, achievement indicators related to what constitutes "success". This may mean that we miss celebrating achievement in our rural schools, preventing many marginalised students from accessing essential educational resources to support their learning. Corbett (2015) argues for incorporating other dimensions of sociology and contemporary social theory and research, to challenge the conceptualisation of successful and effective rural spaces. This raises the question: How do we foreground the uniqueness and significant value of educational research in rural settings? More importantly, what are the take-home messages from research in rural education, when investigating the needs of specific cohorts of children (in both rural and non-rural settings), especially those from diverse backgrounds and with different learning styles? In this chapter, I will specifically consider students with additional needs.

Inclusive practices in Australia have been progressively formalised since 1995, but ironically, given the lack of alternative placement options, inclusion in rural schools is seen as a relatively new practice, and little research has been conducted to explore its pedagogical development (Green et al., 2013). Usually, children with additional needs in rural and remote schools are educated within the one similar age class, or multi-age classes, depending on available resources. How rural schools teach students, and the pedagogical practices they employ to overcome challenges in training, staffing, and resources is not well documented (Telfer & Howley, 2014). In fact, despite policy and curriculum shifts, rural education has remained an undervalued, under research, and underfunded field (Trinidad et al., 2014).

This chapter examines empirical studies conducted in rural Australia and internationally, on issues related to equity and excellence in P-12 schools. The research literature will be reviewed to provide greater clarity about what constitutes "rurality" in these studies, in order to reconceptualise new directions in inclusive education, and how they may traverse to unique perspectives when researching in non-rural settings. The chapter will further highlight the paucity of rural education research around inclusive practice and highlight areas in need of further examination. Implications for conducting rigorous studies, examining the outcomes for students who may have limited access to education, and how that impacts the notion of the "successful school" (regardless of context), will be discussed. Put another way, I am interested in what we can learn from the extended efforts and challenges from rural schools, when accommodating students with additional needs in *all* schools. The point being, to think about how rural education research can make inclusive education better.

Conceptualising Rural Education Research and Inclusion Practice in Australia

Educating children from diverse backgrounds presents many challenges. The diverse profile of students who may be present in any mainstream classroom in Australia may consist of students from many subgroups of disability and learning, Indigenous populations, cultural heritage, and gender identities—to name but a few. Specifically, the availability of diverse learning opportunities for children with additional needs is seen as problematic, especially in rural contexts (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007; Tait & Hussain, 2017). In many instances, rural schools state that they are disadvantaged in terms of educational provision, especially with regard to access to professional development, and materials and supplies, which directly affect students learning and outcomes (Barrio, 2017; Downes & Roberts, 2017). Staffing schools with high-quality teachers, and retaining those teachers, poses challenges around providing all students with equitable learning environments; both within the school community, and also when compared to their metro counterparts.

The education of students from diverse learning backgrounds in Australian schools is guided and mandated by a number of policies and laws. Current legislation which strongly supports and guides inclusive practice in Australian schools includes: anti-discrimination legislation such as the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and The Disability Standards for Education (2005). The National Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011) identifies professional expectations and requirements to promote inclusive practice, requiring teachers to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds; across the full range of abilities. Commitment to a more inclusive education system remains a significant initiative of education policy in Australia; specifically targeting the needs of children from both rural and remote communities, and students with disability.

Irrespective, inclusive education reaches further than local laws and policies. It takes commitment from all stakeholders, in order to address the meanings and purpose of education, and issues around social justice and access (Mitchell et al., 2008). It crosses many sociopolitical, cultural, ethical, personal, and interpersonal dimensions (Mitchell et al., 2008). Coined by Charlton (2007), “it takes a village to educate a child” (p. 79), this proposition could not be more visible in rural contexts, where educating diverse learners involves whole families, the wider community, and extended local resources.

During the past few years, regional and remote areas of Australia have experienced many challenges as a result of a population shift to urban areas in Australia, due primarily to economic and social policy changes (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007). Other factors contributing to this shift include changes in government policy, corporate rationalisation, climate change (Wallace & Boylan, 2009), and reduced opportunities for youth (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007). According the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014–2015), 29% of Australia’s 29 million people live in regional, remote, and very remote areas. This leaves Australia with a very didactic population, and this issue, in

and of itself, poses significant problems in relation to educating Australia's children (Kuhl et al., 2015), especially when educating children with additional needs. The decline of rural populations is indeed a complex issue, as whilst there is a drift to urban areas by some populations, select populations—who are not bound by context—flow into rural environments, such as “tree changers”, and migrant workers. This movement may in fact change the educational needs for certain rural communities in different ways by changing the demographic landscape of many rural societies and education, for example, socio-economic status and community support, both short and long term (Corbett, 2015).

In any event, differing definitions of rurality and remoteness have promoted debate through inconsistent usage in the research, both locally and internationally (Arnold et al., 2005; Stelmach, 2011). Indeed, it is simpler to define urban than rural (Miller, 2012) and as a consequence, this often means that “rurality” is defined for what it is not rather than what it is, adding to deficit perceptions. In Australia, several national classifications for measuring remoteness exist. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) states that the term “rural and remote” includes all areas outside Australia's major cities. For the purposes of the discussions in this chapter, the five categories provided by Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) will be adopted, that is: major cities, inner regional, outer region, remote, and very remote Australia. Remoteness is calculated using an algorithm (ARIA+) which assigns values along a continuum of 0–12, relative to remoteness per square kilometre. The lower the value, the closer the region to major cities.

Classification codes in rural research certainly add to the complexity and inconsistency in rural research, but similarly, classification of support needs for children with different conditions has also made cross-study comparisons complex (Gronvik, 2007). Children with special healthcare needs may have chronic physical, developmental, behavioural, or emotional conditions which require specialised health or educational services of a type or amount beyond that which is required by children generally (Dillon-Wallace, 2012). Using non-specific screeners, such as the *Children with Special Health Care Needs Screener* (CSHCN) devised by Bethell et al. (2002), may alleviate this issue by focussing on the child's need to access specialised and additional medical, educational, or other services. However, education departments in Australia classify and allocate supports based on student needs through education adjustment processes (EAP), which confirm that a student's impairment limits activity and participation. Each state may have different EAP categories. For the purpose of illustrating the complexity around researching children with additional needs in rural schools, Queensland's six EAP categories are: hearing impairment (HI), physical impairment (PI), vision impairment (VI), speech and language impairment (SLI), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and intellectual disability (ID). When cross-referenced with ASGS categories (Table 12.1), on face value, 24 possible rural classifications become evident.

Within each of these categories, many socioecological factors may also come into play, demonstrating the multiplicity of rural environments (Roberts, 2013). For example, what would an inclusive programme for a child who uses a wheelchair to overcome mobility issues look like in a very hot climate and very remote school,

Table 12.1 Education Adjustment Processes (EAP) categories crossed with Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) categories

EAP x ASGS	Inner region	Outer region	Remote	Very remote
Hearing impairment				
Physical impairment				
Vision impairment				
Speech and language impairment				
Autistic spectrum disorder				
Intellectual impairment				

compared to similar physical needs for a child in a very remote school, but in a very cold climate? When considered from this perspective alone, it quickly becomes apparent, why there is such paucity in research in inclusive practice in Australian schools, and why there is a clear and urgent need for funding for research for children in rural areas.

Methodologically, in rural areas (particularly remote and very remote areas) problems arise when finding critical masses of participants in certain cohorts, due to low numbers of homogenous groups. In fact, profiles of groups of diverse learners in rural environments are becoming more heterogeneous. Cohorts considered to be diverse learners include not only children who have additional needs, but students from different cultural, language and SES backgrounds (Jenkinsin, as cited in Kuhl et al., 2015). In addition, researching children in rural environments is also often prohibitive due to geographical challenges, and this has been evident in recruiting participants for large national studies such as the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (Sanson et al., 2002), where the majority of participants reside in metropolitan areas. Having said that, Roberts (2014) discusses adopting methodologies that “focus on the problem to be investigated rather than the method of investigation” (p. 142). Given the multiplicity of rural contexts and categorisations of student needs, place-based methods that give a rich and meaningful profile of teaching pedagogies in these contexts warrants careful consideration. Suitable methodologies may well include case study, ethnographic case study, interview, qualitative longitudinal research, video methods, and a combination or a mosaic approach, providing a richer picture of the true lived experiences of children and families, which standardised test scores do not necessarily reflect.

Regardless of classification and research methodology, what is important to note is that achievement scores decrease, as distance from metro schools increases (Corbett, 2015; Panizzon & Pegg, 2007). The National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and other standardised tests present problems when used to measure school success in rural areas, due to numerous equity issues around access to resources (Drummond, 2012). Equitable access to resources extends beyond the financial. For example, a lack of professional development, staffing, and time has been found to impact the implementation of the national curriculum (Drummond, 2012). Inclusive practice seems at odds with the global agenda that is driven by the process

of selection, competition, and marketisation, led by one-size-fits-all curricular and rigid examinations systems (Mitchell et al., 2008). The pressures around accountability and status of standardised test scores such as PISA, TIMSS, and NAPLAN reinforce the notion that there is a significant disparity in achievement scores between students in metropolitan, regional, and remote areas (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007). Whilst O'Neill (2013) espouses that accountability, transparency, and performance targets are necessary for identifying areas of improvement, he warns that the danger lies in relying on limited and/or restricted criteria in order to access what success may look like. This is particularly important when applied to rural schools, as these schools are heavily reliant on the support of local community, and this is more abundant and forthcoming if the school is viewed as a successful one. Therefore, alternate ways of defining success through teacher ability and student achievement may be better measured in qualifiable terms, which reflect authentic pedagogical practices and leadership efforts (Clarke & Wildy, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003; Telfer & Howley, 2014).

Theorising Rural Intersections—Using Strength-Based Approaches

The review of the literature has given evidence that provisions for students with additional needs in rural areas may be difficult given teacher staffing shortages, and the provision of fewer resources that may support student learning (Downes & Roberts, 2017). Further compounding these issues are the economic and geographic challenges within subgroups of remoteness where teachers may find themselves ill-equipped to manage the many social and welfare issues (White, 2008). Having said that, some of the characteristics of rural schools may contribute to high-quality inclusive education practices for students from diverse learning backgrounds from which rural schools can serve as an example (Downes & Roberts, 2017; Telfer & Howley, 2014; Wallace & Boylan, 2009). Smaller class size, lower teacher to student ratios, family-like atmosphere, and community-based supports, position schools well for fully inclusive programmes (McLaughlin et al., 2005; Provasnik et al., 2007). Furthermore, it has been shown that the smallness and closeness of the rural community provides an environment where parents help, support, and encourage beginning teachers in their practices of including children with a disability into schools and classrooms (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Kuhl et al., 2015). Parents are more involved in parent and teacher conferences and school events (Provasnik et al., 2007). It has been found that student Individual Education Plan (IEP) collaboration is higher in rural schools than suburban and urban schools. Explanations around these phenomena could be examined from a rural perspective, using theories which challenge deficient perspectives, and using a socioecological lens, within the concept of place. How can we best research and theorise about the effective and successful work in rural schools,

so that metropolitan schools can benefit from implementing successful programmes, when faced with a myriad of challenges?

Using a Rural Lens

Much of the literature in rural education discusses, or is framed within, deficit understandings of rural settings (Green et al., 2013; Wallace & Boylan, 2009). Reports of negative experiences of early career teachers such as difficulties procuring affordable housing, limited professional development, and isolation contributes to negative perceptions of rural Australia, which deters teachers from considering teaching positions in these areas (Green et al., 2013; Roberts, 2013). Such reports promote a rural-urban binary, marginalising rural populations, asserting the dominance of metro-centric views, and promoting existing rural-deficit models (Ankrah-Dove, 1982). Ankrah-Dove herself theorises this negative viewpoint from a “challenge/deficit” position, arguing that teachers predominately hold either a challenge or a deficit viewpoint about rural appointments, rural schools, and their communities. This “social othering” (Hughes, 2010) is further exacerbated by a second layer of deficit, or for want of a better term, a double deficit. Children from diverse learning backgrounds are often viewed from a medical model to address and identify issues surrounding disability (Manago et al., 2017). Though a medical model is compulsory for understanding the tenets around conditions that fall outside normative parameters, a social model from a strengths-based approach provides an important perspective of the lived experiences of those living with disability in rural environments (Manago et al., 2017).

This existing “rural lens” calls for a reversal of thinking, not only outwards (and inwards) from the teaching profession, but from a position where the strengths that children with additional needs bring to rural schools are highlighted and valued. This can be demonstrated by schools in Canada that have adopted a strengths-based approach as a strategy to sustain the social, cultural, and economic attributes of rural communities (Wallace & Boylan, 2009). This perspective strengthens their community’s capacity by way of building options through the provision of contextually relevant services of which education, and the staffing and support of rural and remote schools, is one cornerstone (Wallace & Boylan, 2009).

Place—Affordances of Rural Schools and Districts

Place is not only a human imagining, but also a social construction (Green et al., 2013). By definition, “it is the experiences, activities, routines and interactions (or ways of inhabiting a space) to which individuals or groups assign meaning (Green et al., 2013, p. 96). Wallace and Boylan (2009) further discuss place in terms of an educational context that connects with the local tradition and concerns, with children

learning contextually in their environment. However, Green et al. (2013) challenge this thinking by insightfully suggesting that place is not so much context per se, but can be useful when reconceptualising preconceived ideas around rural teaching and when examining the lived experiences of being in a rural place. Using notions of place, instead of just context, reminds us of the human agency in place-making and incorporates the social structures and relationships that guide and respond to life experiences in rural and remote settings (Green et al., 2013). Poignantly, these authors adopt the notion of transgressive data—data that is emotional, sensual, and responsive when reimagining teaching in rural contexts—in other words, letting go of negative aspects of rurality and teaching, and really engaging in the lived experiences of the inhabitants (Green et al., 2013). For families living with a child with a disability in a rural context, theirs is a complex and layered experience, which drives home the rural standpoint of Roberts (2014) “that rural people and communities *really* matter” (p. 136).

Helfenbein (as cited in Green, 2013) expands on the notion of place by stating that there exists a reciprocal relationship between people and places. His reasoning is that place and its inhabitants do not exist in isolation. Bronfenbrenner’s socioecological theory supports this viewpoint, with its interconnected and reciprocal systems, and this model is particularly useful when examining inclusive practice (Dillon-Wallace, 2017; Summers et al., 1988). This could be particularly important when researching areas where some of the variables are magnified by the very context in which they reside. In order to further illustrate, Bronfenbrenner’s socioecological theory has been used to show the nexus between sociocultural, political, and economic factors that impact on school and community functioning (both positively and negatively) (Reid, 2017), and the multitude of factors that may need to be examined when conducting research around inclusive practice in Australian schools (Fig. 12.1). Arnold (as cited in Panizzoni & Pegg, 2007) supports this rationale by stating that schools are not isolated entities but are the epicentre of real communities. This theoretical approach has been adopted, as over the past decade or so, there has been a paradigm shift in inclusive practice from fixing the individual (medical model), to fixing the environment (social model) (Turnbull et al., 2004). However, it is acknowledged in the literature, that there is a considerable way to go before the environment is fixed (Tait & Hussain, 2017).

Corbett (2015) also supports the call for this expanded view when examining the factors that affect the conceptualisation of place in rural settings. He states that whilst there is interest in place-based education as a research paradigm (Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008), that there is little recognition of what the elements are per se, or how they affect place. To illustrate some of the elements at the macro-level, many rural areas present with low or declining socio-economic status (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009), which has been found to lower academic performance (Corbett, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2013). Indeed, schools may attempt to enhance their curriculum through online courses, but access to technology and effective broadband is likely to affect the quality of online support, when compared to metro counterparts (Freeman & Park, 2015). It is not well understood how schools in rural areas abate the effects of differing levels of SES (Corbett, 2015), and even less research is committed to

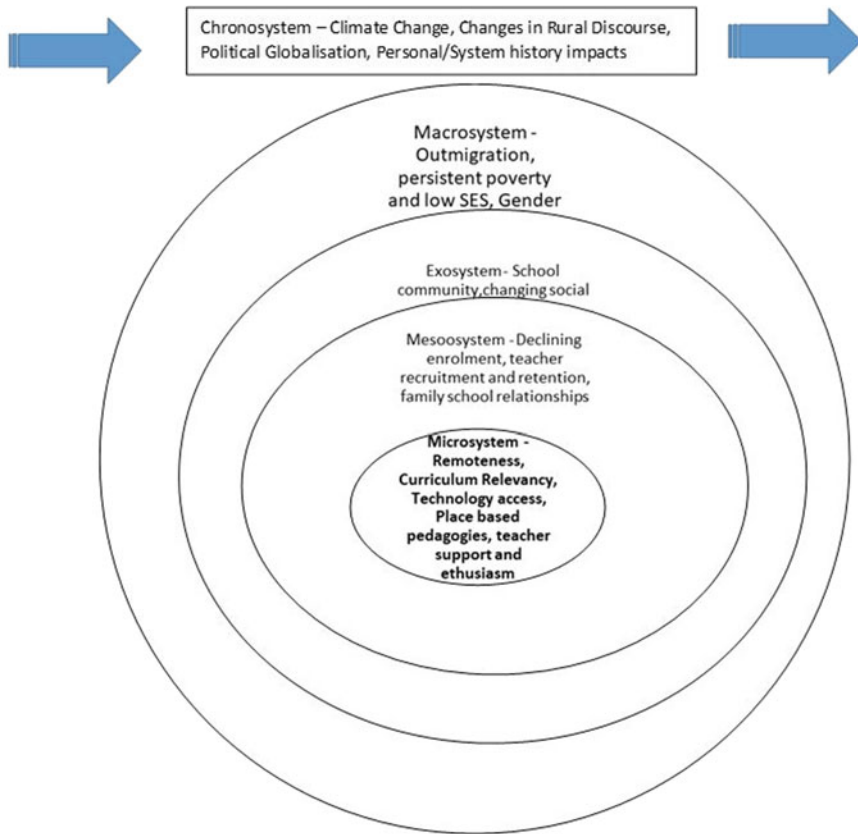


Fig. 12.1 The strengths and challenges of rural environments, situated within each ecological system

challenges in implementing programmes for students with additional needs in rural areas under these conditions. In short, rural schools face numerous (and complex) context-driven challenges and conditions that are constant and persistent (Stelmach, 2011).

How Might Rural Education Research Inform the Field of Inclusive Practice?

There remain enduring challenges when teaching inclusion in rural locales (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Specifically, these challenges encompass difficulty in recruiting and retaining special education teachers, limited professional development for special

education instruction for all educators, differences in priorities of education departments, and those of parents and community (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Telfer & Howley, 2014). Teachers are the most important resource in schools, and rural schools feel a greater sense of pressure in recruiting and retaining teachers in order for students to receive a quality and equitable education, especially when considered against the opportunities and supports that children in metropolitan schools receive (Miller, 2012). It has been found that rural schools have more inexperienced teachers than metro schools (Miller, 2012). Together with the inherent shortages of teaching staff and/or instructional materials, these factors hinder learning for all students, especially those with additional needs (Mueller & Brewer, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2013; Tait & Hussain, 2017).

Apart from these more obvious challenges, many teachers in rural areas may also feel professional isolation, geographic isolation, and increased diversity of caseloads—all which may lead to role confusion (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Rural areas may present more onerous living and working conditions than urban areas, especially for teachers who are from predominately urban/suburban backgrounds (McEwan, 1999). The tyranny of distance, together with restricted funding for teaching support from specialist visiting teachers and allied health professionals, results in regional pressure to amalgamate services (Drummond et al., 2012). As a result, teachers have to travel further for professional experience, and opportunities to attend may be further restricted as schools may be unable to access relief staff to cover absent teachers, especially those who teach within specialised areas. In addition, teachers in rural areas incur increased costs to attend professional development due to high travel costs and accommodation (Drummond et al., 2012; Telfer & Howley, 2014).

However, as previously stated, rural schools have many of the professional qualities that teachers prefer, that is, smaller class size, smaller enrolments, and smaller student-teacher ratios (Miller, 2012). Telfer and Howley (2014) found that some of the special features of some rural districts, such as reduced size, cohesion, a sense of mission, and dedicated staff, can make significant improvements in closing achievement gaps for children from diverse backgrounds, especially those with disabilities. However, in rural settings, performance trends are almost impossible to map due to teacher turnover, changes in service delivery, lack of test takers, and challenges that are inherent in conducting longitudinal studies such as attrition and cost (Telfer & Howley, 2014). Therefore, it may be difficult to determine achievement gaps based on strengths-based models (McLaughlin et al., 2005). Furthermore, defining the gap for children with additional needs may add to the marginalisation of children in these communities, therefore the differences may never be bridged (Telfer & Howley, 2014). As an alternative, features of successful outcomes when teaching children with additional needs may be gleaned from the few studies in areas which encounter a disproportionate level of disadvantage. The implementation of specific strategies such as place-based curriculum, online responses/support for differentiated lesson plans, literacy intervention, and preservice teacher preparation and university partnership (Hoppey, 2016) has been shown to contribute to closing achievement gaps (Guilott & Parker, 2010).

Regardless of the challenges faced by rural schools, it is evident that lack of opportunities and support do not keep rural schools from using strategies and pedagogies that achieve full inclusion. Research shows that internationally, rural schools respond to intervention, differentiation, implement effective co-teaching, and use universal design for learning, irrespective of support factors (Telfer & Howley, 2014). Considering that the same effective pedagogies are implemented in Australian rural schools, what can Australian rural schools tell us about the tenacity of these communities when teaching children with additional needs?

Telfer and Howley (2014) espouse that typical deficit positions to rural teaching (demographics, poverty status, or its increasing diversity) should not be an impediment to high-quality inclusive practice for all school students. Certainly, numerous studies have contributed to the deficit model by explaining low achievement on the basis of race, poverty, rural and remoteness, and culture—a melting pot of blame. Similar problems are exacerbated by educators and researchers excusing schools from examining and overcoming inequities by taking a deficit approach, focusing of impediments such as teacher recruitment and retention, community tensions, or limited funding and/or resources. These challenges certainly exist, but taking a strengths-based approach to overcoming inequities and ensuring inclusive education for all children is certainly shown to be within the possibilities for rural districts, as exemplars to metro counterparts (Telfer & Howley, 2014). Overcoming so-called rural deficiencies may offer insightful and resourceful ways of how best to help all practitioners (such as their urban counterparts) deliver successful inclusive programmes, especially when under challenging conditions.

Discussion and Implications—New Opportunities for Research

In keeping with the idea of challenging deficit models, new ideals of research in rural settings will be presented from a strengths-based approach. In other words, what can we learn from research in rural areas (both domestic and internationally), that may be traversed to metropolitan areas in order to better understand (and improve) inclusive teaching practice overall? How does this positive approach to their work support inclusive practice, often in areas where resources are scarcer, and contextual challenges are difficult to overcome? These challenges are by no means restricted to rural areas, as urban schools experience some of the same barriers to effective inclusive programmes. However, it is the extended efforts of teachers in rural schools that could provide important answers for all practitioners.

Having said that, regardless of the positive aspects of inclusive practices in rural education and what we can learn for transference to other educational contexts, there is no denying that rural education is in urgent need of more attention from local and national government, policy-makers, and education departments (Stelmach, 2011). Specific attention should be paid to the poorer outcomes in remote and very remote

areas. As a starting point, these discussions should be around policy, and how first principles of inclusive practice are enacted, as per curriculum models and teaching standards in Australia. Policy-makers and education departments need to re-evaluate rural and remote inclusive education service models, create funding opportunities for university staff to travel remotely to conduct research, and implement research-based models (Tait & Hussain, 2017). To that end, policy-makers and education departments should guide the development of context appropriate curriculum (Stelmach, 2011). Autonomy of curriculum should be taken into account when designing context/place relevant curriculum (Drummond et al., 2012). Clearly, inclusion in rural environments is not just about policy change but is guided by a sense of place (Kuhl et al., 2015). By embedding Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model within the framework of place, many more positive aspects of rural schooling, which in fact facilitate inclusion, become evident (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2003).

To add to factors contributing to effective inclusive teaching in rural schools, correlations between teacher backgrounds (both personal and professional), and stability of teaching careers, could add to existing research (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). As an example, the closeness of the staff and shared responsibility has been attributed to teacher satisfaction in rural schools, and this was reported by one American school with low staff attrition rates (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Early career special educators within rural sites have placed specific importance on strong collegial support (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). Likewise, family-like atmospheres in the staff via team teaching, mentoring, shared planning time and weekly team meetings, peer coaching and evaluation, and support by caring administrators, helped less experienced staff discuss problems with more experienced staff in a non-threatening environment (Berry & Gravelle, 2013, Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). Studies have shown that this closeness is the quality that teachers enjoy most in rural schools (Huysman, as cited in Berry & Gravelle, 2013). This has led to increasing retention in American rural schools, especially for early career special education teachers (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). This is particularly important, as staff turnover hinders the transference of knowledge and continuity of teaching practices for not only students with disabilities, but all students (Kuhl et al., 2015). Younger teachers in rural schools have stated that they feel that a younger, less experienced staff in rural schools is beneficial to inclusive practices, as these staff are more willing to adapt and utilise resources in creative ways in order to accommodate all students (Kuhl et al., 2015). Studies in general rural settings do support, that young teachers are more open and accepting of inclusive practices (Jenkins et al., 2003).

So, what if there was recognition of the ways that newly appointed teachers create and shape centres and schools and how they positively affect children, their peers and others, rather than a focus on their "needs" and inadequacies and their tendencies to not stay long enough (Green et al., 2013)? Future research should focus on the factors that create a shared sense of responsibility for teaching all children in an inclusive setting, together with children from diverse backgrounds (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Material resources may be fewer than metro areas, but community assets may be in abundance (Mitchell et al., 2008). To reduce the achievement gap between rural and urban schools, rural schools should have the opportunity to have resources distributed

to meet community needs. This could further illuminate and support the needs of urban schools (Sullivan et al., 2013).

Specific studies for special education teachers in rural environments should be conducted in order to investigate the factors that support specialised work, and how these teachers can be best retained in rural settings (Berry & Gravelle 2013). Teachers and administrators are in a unique position to foster and nurture important environments that matter in their schools (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Promoting positive environments that encourage positive outcomes, contributing to higher quality for students with disabilities, warrants close examination (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). In this way, teachers may develop a stronger sense of place. Would we be able to take a more optimistic view of re-inventing our inclusive schools by getting everyone onboard and taking action (Mitchell et al., 2008)?

Longitudinally, relationships between teacher quality and student achievement require reliable indicators connecting students to teachers to whom they are assigned, tracking this relationship over time. From another viewpoint, improvement to teacher quality in rural schools may be best directed to teachers who are already practising and committed to their classrooms (Barrett et al., 2015). Alternatively, enabled support should be given to beginning teachers as an ongoing project rather than cross-sectional moment in time (Green et al., 2013). Teachers may experience the satisfaction of becoming an active and powerful force for children and families as an important and integral part of the fabric of rural communities (Thruston & Navarrete, 2003). Teacher satisfaction is particularly important for positive impacts on the education for children with disabilities in these contexts. In addition, teacher satisfaction is also important in fostering positive climates within school environments (Berry & Gravelle, 2013), thus further confronting the challenge/deficit position. Irrespective, no matter what the teaching cohort and/or context, improvements in teacher capacity and retention may only be achieved if every one of us is committed to build better schools, and thus build better communities and societies (Mitchell et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Young people are still seeking inclusive education rather than receiving it (Kuhl et al., 2015). Providing rich educational experiences may be less challenging than changing views about student success and what constitutes meaningful life opportunities for students in rural settings (Howley et al., 2009). To explore these challenges, methods in research that provide rich descriptions around the lived experiences of teachers, families, and children in rural environments are necessary. This will certainly inform practices in urban environments, reminding stakeholders around the resilience and tenacity of educators in environments that for all intents and purposes, may hinder success. Most poignantly, we continue to ask how do/can teachers learn to be, become, and belong in (rural) places (Green et al., 2013)?

As a final note, a quote from Roger Slee (in Mitchell et al., 2008) remains constant, “Inclusion is an aspiration for democratic education and therefore the project of inclusion addresses the experiences of all learners at school” (p. 100).

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Chapter 13

Linguistic Landscape Methodologies in Rural Education and Educational Research



Pam Bartholomaeus

Abstract In rural educational research, a key aim is to understand more deeply, or in different ways, relations between places and education. If we take seriously the point that rural spaces are unique in their own ways, then research methodologies also need careful consideration. Research projects developed with a focus on rural education need careful attention and design to be appropriate to the location and to achieve the goals of fostering understanding of a rural place.

In this chapter, the possibilities for research exploring aspects of rural education that are offered by Linguistic Landscape (LL) research methodologies are explored. I will commence with an exploration of the extent and nature of LL methodologies that are currently conducted almost entirely in city or metropolitan locations. Thus, this chapter differs in that the value of LL research for rural location will be highlighted.

The application of LL methodologies to rural education can assist rural educators to understand the sociological characteristics of their community. Key goals would be helping teachers to understand the nature of the community, how the community is working to sustain economic and cultural life, how current social and cultural practices are a reflection of both the past history of the community and of current regulatory, and the economic and social pressures from outside the community. LL work can thus be the basis for delivering a curriculum that reflects the local rural place and that will equip all students for futures whether they remain local or move to a life elsewhere.

Entering a rural community, it is easy to assume much about life there. Rural places are often picturesque, quiet, and small and can be isolated, but there is more. Assumptions happen because most people have some knowledge of rural places, possibly through living at some time in another rural place, from visiting or passing through rural places, or, vicariously through literature and various media. Analysis of the signage located in public spaces in a community can reveal much about the community and the lives of people living there. The research methodology Linguistic

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Landscape (LL) can be used to gain a more accurate insight into aspects of the life of a community. In this chapter, I will outline some of the complexities of rural education research and then introduce linguistic landscape (LL) as a research methodology which can provide insights into communities through analysis of visible language. An example of LL research conducted in a rural community will be shared before exploring some ways in which LL can be adapted for rural research and outlining some new insights this methodology can bring to research in education.

It is not sufficient to simply identify a place as rural based on location and size as a basis for researching rurality and aspects of life in rural locations (Coladarci, 2007). Rather, understanding of a rural place needs to be based on its unique characteristics, including physical environment, demographic features, and social, cultural, and economic aspects (Donehower et al., 2012). Without consideration of these characteristics, the rural community, or groups within the community, can easily be seen as deficit, difficult, and underperforming (Ryan, 2012). This leaves the researcher without an appropriate basis for critique of expectations about educational outcomes, or relevance of the curriculum or pedagogy for the student cohort (Cremin & Drury, 2015). These understandings are important as education is more than simply passing on knowledge to learners, but also about young people becoming ‘successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens’ (MCEETYA, 2008). Effective pedagogies and research need to be shaped by the socio-cultural experiences, understandings, and world views of the community and its students in their unique context (Corbett, 2010).

Some definitions of rural are stated in terms of what rural is not—in comparison with urban or metropolitan locations (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Ryan, 2012). That is, views of rural are often in terms of what a place is lacking (e.g. population, access to services, and retail options) and difficulties associated with life in that location (e.g. isolation, poor medical options). These views are a foundation for deficit and inaccurate impressions of rural life (Ryan, 2012). Alternatively, nostalgic views of rural places may predominate (Howley & Howley, 2014). Corbett and White (2014) contend that while rural places exist in close connection with urban locations they are important in their own right and are connected to the economy in ways that continue to transform them in complex and ever-changing ways. Activities in a rural place differ from urban and other rural places, making each rural place unique. These are important reasons for deeply understanding each rural town and its community. This situatedness is an important feature of rural research, and clarity about context advances research approaches, so the diversity of all places can be engaged.

Gruenewald (2003) proposes that it is important to know one’s place well in order to learn to live well there. Therefore, learning needs to draw on aspects of the social, cultural, and economic lives of the students in their rural community. Working from similar thinking about the benefits of learning about one’s home community, Brooke (2003) edited volume documents students’ positive responses to learning activities and writing tasks that took them into their community. There are significant advantages gained from recognising students’ lived experiences and using their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2013). While the rural population is the minority in most developed countries as rural-urban migration and urbanisation continue, the

productivity of people living and working in rural areas is vital to supporting life in urban locations, through food production and provision of other resources needed for living. For Australia, rural areas are important for their significant contribution to the nation's ecological sustainability, exports, and for national security. This importance is repeated in many other nations.

Linguistic Landscape Methodology

Linguistic Landscape (LL) provides a way of looking at communication in the landscape and developing an understanding of language usage, while also exploring what is unique about the community, particularly its social and cultural life and aspects of its economic base. LL has grown out of the work of Landry and Bourhis (1997). They wrote:

[t]he language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. (p. 25)

Landry and Bourhis used signage in public spaces in a community in eastern Canada to understand the ways in which French and English were used in a minority francophone community outside Quebec. They were seeking to understand the relative power and influence of each of these languages in the lives of people in that community. Subsequently, LL became a methodology, using quantitative methods, to explore language usage in a range of multilingual locations in Europe and some Asian contexts, principally in urban settings. More recently, LL has also been used for qualitative research, and in this chapter, its adaptability to rural locations is being demonstrated. This advances the approach through engagement with the particularity of rural places. Rural towns include a range of institutions reflecting the key functions and economic activities. Similarly, qualitative applications of LL in an urban hub would provide insight into the distribution of government and/or corporate offices, charity outlets, and private enterprises which would indicate the services and employment opportunities available locally or requiring travel to another location.

Looking at the LL is a way of understanding more about place and the people living there (Papen, 2012). Noting the physical landscape as one enters a town usually reveals key agricultural production, such as cotton, cereals, viticulture or fruit growing, or other forms of primary production such as fishing or mining. Key economic activities may be clearly on show, perhaps through the utilities with company signage driven around with rotating lights and flags where mining occurs. Alternatively, it might be the large milk factory or the framework over a mineshaft dominating the skyline, or presence of heavy earthmoving machinery signalling a dominant industry. These give insight into key generators of wealth for the community but less about the social and cultural lives of the people and the availability of services. Qualitative analysis of LL data reveals: the main commercial activities and

services available (shop signs, business names, signs to available services); how businesses and individuals seek the attention of others (advertising or informing about future events); ways people's lives are regulated (signs that direct or prohibit); and the social and cultural life of a place (including plaques and dates on buildings and signs informing about historical significance).

Linguistic Landscape research in multilingual places has involved identifying usage of particular languages, analysis of ways in which languages are used. For example, by looking at which language is foregrounded via position, counts can then be made of relative positions, or the number of times each language appears in a defined area, and so use of language in the landscape remained quantitative research. However, LL research is becoming broader as qualitative methods are now being adapted for understanding communities. An interesting example of this is work by Papen (2012) conducted in a part of East Berlin looking at a shopping precinct and surrounding area which had undergone gentrification over the previous twenty years. Qualitative analysis of written texts and visual images enabled her to move more deeply into language choice, including why particular English words had been chosen by businesses to have them stand out from the competition and attract potential shoppers inside. The LL data analysis also revealed contestation as a response to social change evident in signs inviting citizens to act and build a local coalition protesting the personal implications of development and gentrification.

Where LL is not used to explore how language is used in a multilingual community, the linguistic landscape data can instead be analysed to understand what is valued by the people, the core activities of the community, ways in which life in the community is influenced by actors beyond the community, and how the community seeks to differentiate itself. LL can be used to begin to explore life in defined communities to answer a range of questions. One such use, informed by sustainability literature, might be how themes of social and cultural life, economic activity, and ecological issues are present in the rural community (Cloke, 2006; Cocklin, 2005). Following the lead of some of the earlier LL research, the use of language can also be explored to answer questions about the presence of power in the community—who has power and how that power is manifested in people's lives.

LL is a way of accessing life in the rural community, which goes well beyond assumptions and stereotypes. Just as the presence of the Golden Arches of a McDonalds' outlet indicates some things about a place—such as size and the volume of passing clientele, and the presence of an international business—so a survey of the visible signage of a rural community can indicate the penetration of national and international influences, and possibly the stamp of local on these businesses. LL research is a means of developing a picture of a rural community that transcends stereotypes. It offers a means to overcome stereotypes and an opportunity for a visitor or newcomer to begin to identify key characteristics of the community. A consideration of the mix and extent of signs and information can give a picture of life and key values of members of the community which can replace stereotypes carried into the community.

A Case Study of the Main Street and Beyond

A study of a small regional centre in rural South Australia located in one of the prime wine-producing areas of the state is presented as an example of LL's use in a rural and mono-lingual community. In summer, the green vines are a welcome contrast to the dry areas of cereal and livestock production of the surrounding landscape. This modest sized town of less than 3,000 people services a large surrounding area. The metropolitan area of Adelaide is a manageable day trip for people with access to private transport. Items photographed for this LL research project were public signs; business names and advertising located on the outside of buildings; and texts in public areas such as plaques, information boards, and on shop windows. Data were collected as photographs, working from two (out of four) entrances to the township into the centre where most retail outlets were located. When a local market was discovered during data collection, transient signage became part of the dataset. While it would be beneficial to include such photographs to illustrate the chapter, the dilemma of inadvertent identification of the community is unavoidable (see Chapters 17 and 18 of this edition for further discussion of this persistent challenge in rural research).

Initial analysis of the data indicated a range of retail outlets and services for residents and visitors expected in a regional centre. Large retail businesses included supermarkets, agribusiness outlets, automotive and machinery dealerships, hardware and discount stores, and service stations, most which were part of large national businesses or franchises and were easily recognised. Smaller locally owned retail businesses included clothing, electrical, homewares, handicrafts, and telecommunications stores; bakeries; pharmacies; cafés; and restaurants. Some of these businesses were part of buying groups with related branding, in contrast to other small businesses which were locally owned and unique in their branding. Health services were also evident, including two general practitioners' medical centres, a hospital, aged care facilities, pathology collection point, and various allied and alternative health providers. Three major banks and local, state, and federal government offices also serviced the area.

In common with other wine-producing districts, tourism was important. Signs at the southern entrance to the town directed visitors to tourist information, accommodation, food outlets, and the location of wineries and other places to visit. The road signs were easily recognisable as most followed the national formatting of colour and size, including brown signs for key tourist locations and blue signs for services for visitors. Similar patterns of signage are usually carried into urban centres, particularly highway signs and signs directing traffic to key destinations, which help to direct drivers. Many also serve to direct traffic past hubs, seemingly focussed on the needs of the local population in order to avoid adding congestion. Standard styled tourist signs in urban locations direct traffic to what are perceived to be key destinations, making it difficult for new attractions to become established. The large number of signs of this type in a city such as Canberra, the national capital of Australia, is reflective of the large number of important national monuments primarily located near the centre of the city.

A Saturday market provided some different insights. This event principally provided food businesses without a permanent presence in the shopping precinct the opportunity for an outlet for goods, with a focus on differentiation and value adding for some primary producers, including wines, olives and olive oil, cereal and legume products, lamb products, honey, and fruit preserves and conserves. Many of the stallholders had professionally created logos and labels, while several also had professionally designed packaging suited to sales through formal retail outlets. There were also some empty shop premises and a papered over shop front with legal notices about a foreclosure, indicating a fragile and contracting local retail precinct. Together with the sales occurring at the market, these point toward many small business owners working hard in effort to prosper, some unsuccessfully. Similar insights into urban locations may come from identifying empty business premises and office space. Perhaps there are new boutique businesses, such as a coffee shop incorporating coffee roasting, or a grocery store catering for customers wanting to avoid single-use plastics or seeking products with fewer 'food miles' that may be part of a developing market.

At the southern entrance to the town is a large sign, approximately five metres high and three metres wide, displaying the logos and information about international and national awards achieved by local businesses. The awardees sharing their successes are local wineries, accommodation providers, and a farm tourism business. Dates of the awards indicate the sign is updated regularly. Smaller notices of national recognition are also displayed on two shop windows in the main street and on a sandwich board of a business near the entrance to the town. These businesses are striving to be recognised for high quality and to present the district as a place where excellence is achieved. This suggests the importance of local businesses for attracting new customers.

A surprising find related to economic activity was the range of goods for sale at the market. This included differentiation of goods such as premium lamb meat, and value adding to production, for example lamb pastries, olive oils, pastas and snacks made from cereals and legumes, grape and fruit wines, and packaged honey. These stalls present outlets for very small-scale secondary industries. Similar differentiation of local produce was also signalled on several shop windows and a sandwich board outside a food outlet advertising the locally produced foods they were selling. The range of service outlets identified was diverse, but uncertain, with evidence of the withdrawal of a bank (leaving two major banks and a community bank to service the region), the presence of empty shop fronts and a foreclosure notice. Given the propensity for changes in regionalisation policies of government departments, the existence of state and federal government services can also be transitory, particularly for a town of modest size. Reinforcing the production basis of this, and many rural communities, satellite towns, and urban hubs can also reveal change and efforts to meet the resulting challenges.

There were additional findings of note about economic activities in the town. Each entrance to the town was marked by welcome signs bearing logos of ten service clubs and volunteer organisations. There was further evidence of the importance of local volunteer and financial sponsorship in signage attached to an art installation

and a walking and cycling trail passing along the eastern side of the town. Flyers for coming events displayed in shop windows signalled a further range of local activities dependent on volunteers. The voluntary work and financial support required of residents in local communities are still very important. In contrast to earlier decades when the town had many industries sustaining it, the range of secondary industry was represented by a solitary winery on the edge of the town. As part of this change, much production from the surrounding areas is now sent to other locations for value adding or processed in boutique businesses. Tertiary level services included those for primary producers which were mainly located away from the main shopping area. Some of these businesses provided goods such as machinery, hardware, accountancy and legal, and farm bookkeeping and business advice. Evident was a single example of a quaternary business, collecting international data and providing advice and services for marketing grains globally.

A further critical reading of the LL data highlighted the absence of some voices in this community. A sign at each entrance to the town announces a 'township dry zone' (alcohol-free zone) between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. and indicates penalties for outdoor consumption of alcohol between those hours. This sanction is reiterated by a sign at a small park located in the centre of the main street opposite a hotel. Everyone is subjected to the state rules about the sale of alcohol displayed on the glass fencing around an outdoor drinking area adjacent to the hotel. Sales of wines and beers, with the appropriate licence, are allowed during markets and evening street closures for festival events, but consumption late at night by other groups is explicitly forbidden, with police assistance offered for those concerned about anyone ignoring the dry zone conditions. The stipulation of particular hours on the dry zone signs is directed to a specific target group suggesting previous conflicts within the community. Another absent set of voices is of those who speak other languages, for example the owners of the award-winning Indian restaurant and takeaway, and any other residents from families which have come from places where languages other than English are spoken. Additionally, recognition of the First Nations people of the area and their language is also absent with the single exception of the name of a set of aged resident units. This critical reading leads to recognition of tensions within the community and silencing of users of other languages.

New Theoretical Insights for LL from the Rural Perspective

Publications in the field of LL have focused on multilingual contexts in urban locations, looking at the languages used rather than the content of the signs (Gorter, 2013; Papien, 2012). However, LL is also a useful tool for implementing place-conscious research and analysis of data for economic, political, ecological, and cultural aspects of life in a community.¹ Extending the use of LL to gain insights into the relative

¹Due to lack of space, a comprehensive analysis using each of these themes has not been included here.

power of languages in context, here it is being suggested that LL is also valuable for looking at the ways businesses and other entities influence, regulate, or inform potential customers, users, and members of the rural community. LL analysis can identify signs of innovation, prosperity, vulnerability, or economic stress in the community. While Landry and Bhouris (1997) explored the power of two languages in a multilingual context, LL can also be used to explore a monolingual community, its aspirations, and the relative power underpinning language used in public signs. Identifying this in a defined social space of a rural community has enabled identification of this gap in much literature of the approach, which can then be adopted more generally. LL can help educators understand the communities—regardless of geographic classification—students live in by looking at the language environment and what it says about life outside school for students. Such an approach offers important opportunities for any school given that teachers are likely to be more mobile, especially in lower SES communities, where urban mobility can be limited by social background and economic circumstance. Many urban communities also exhibit linguistic or cultural characteristics linked to waves of migration and local industry.

In the case study presented above, a critical reading of regulations about the township's dry zone led to further questions: For whose benefit does the dry zone exist? Who decided this prohibition was necessary? Whose consumption of alcohol is being regulated? The presence of the dry zone suggests there are different social groups contesting shared community space, with one group being managed (even policed) by more powerful others. A critical reading can be made of the service organisations included in a sign at each entrance to the town. The presence or absence of services is key to a community. Further evidence of the importance of local volunteers and local sponsorship of activities and facilities was visible away from the main retail area. Here, data indicated a range of services and facilities provided by local people, and vital to the sustainability of the community. It also indicates the importance of ensuring adequate data are collected, to facilitate a deeper understanding of the local social and economic environment.

A careful survey of businesses reveals the range of goods and services available, and thus what is able to be accessed locally. For example, a town without a bank means people need to travel elsewhere for more complex banking needs. In contrast, a medical clinic which offers a range of visiting medical specialists will bring visitors from the wider area, who may then also shop in the town. The mix of businesses, which are locally owned, part of franchises, badged as part of a buying group, or selling goods with foreign names indicate exposure to national and international markets, and so both the retention and removal of profits from the community. In contrast, empty shop fronts indicate difficult times and probably a shrinking of the prosperity of the community or perhaps a significant change in the past, if buildings have been vacant for some years. Alternatively, an unexpected source of data was the market with signs of transient or periodic economic activity and an alternative outlet for goods produced locally.

Some key lessons are that LL data collection in a rural community can be enhanced by the addition of interviews such as those Papen (2012) conducted when researching signs in a neighbourhood in Berlin. It is also important to carefully consider the

research questions as decisions are made about the area to be surveyed for LL data collection, and collecting over a period of time or revisiting for another 'look' can allow the eye to note different things and to catch the transient signs. In this way, the changing and ephemeral nature of a rural community can be captured.

New Insights for Education Research to Be Gained from LL Methodology

LL can be a key part of understanding a community, the socio-economic life of the place, the cultural practices, and what is valued. This is important in an era of national curriculum documents which promote uniform educational outcomes across Australia, with similar documents existing in other countries. Accountability enacted through standardisation and testing against those standards is another factor pulling education in local places towards a placeless learning. Analysis of the use of language is a tool for researchers and educators new to a place as well as for those well familiar with that place to look with a different lens. Gruenewald (2003) calls for us to learn to live well in our local place and community and the importance of education bridging the gap between school and the local place. Importantly, Gruenewald's work and much place-based education from the United States of America emanate from 'urban education'. Corbett (2010) advises that considering students' sociocultural background is important to enable teachers to better engage them in learning: another call for understanding the local community. A connection between local knowledge, values, practices and lifestyles, and the curriculum requires building a knowledge of the culture(s) and values of the community. LL also enables research to start from a strengths perspective, with recognition and valuing of the assets, or funds of knowledge, students bring to school (Moll et al., 2013).

LL provides an opportunity for the understanding of a local place which goes beyond what can be learnt from statistics (e.g. average income, level of education achieved, languages spoken, nationality, or level of volunteering). While a survey of visible language can confirm the almost universal dominance of English in a rural community, examination of signs can also show engagement with the global economy along with the inherent risks, the difficulty locating some services, and the values of organisations which seek to engage and be supported by local people (including schools and services managed by volunteers). There is much young people can learn about their local community and LL is a relevant research methodology to explore aspects of life where they live as part of a range of different learning areas within the curriculum, including language and literacy, numeracy and mathematics, history, geography, civics and citizenship, and art and design. They can learn how to read and think critically, to understand the implications of what they see, and what local people can bring to assist the sustainability of their local place. In this way, young people as researchers of their own place develop a deeper understanding of what exists and, with a critical reading, what might exist into the future. These are key to

learning to live well and contribute to one's local place, for their future lives in that place or another place (Brooke, 2003; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Gruenewald, 2003).

Rural educational research needs to be based on the understanding of a rural location, and to make meaningful connections as data are collected, analysed, and findings established (Biddle et al., 2019; Coladarci, 2007). Qualitative research in rural locations needs to be based on the understanding of the rural site(s), in order to be conducted with integrity and rigour (Tracy, 2010). Implementing preliminary fieldwork for qualitative research projects provides researchers with the opportunity to build research integrity, particularly where the researchers are coming into community which is new to them (Caine et al., 2009). Using LL as the principal research methodology, or as part of a range of methodologies, will enable researchers to more deeply understand the context of their research, and theorise their findings. LL is offered as an innovative methodology (Biddle et al., 2019). It enables careful analysis of power as manifested within a community and yields knowledge which is important to the continuing work of seeking to ensure rural communities remain sustainable and vibrant into the future. LL can facilitate in-depth research of a location, with a critical reading contributing to an understanding of strengths, struggles, and what is missing. It can facilitate exploring what local people contribute to their place, and what could be better developed to enhance the community living well and sustainably into the future to which rural education can make key contributions. In terms of rural research, the use of LL research methodology adds a layer to evolving methods and the usual benefit of appending 'rural' to a research site. Equally, by looking at a rural location LL approaches have been broadened. This research suggests a way for all schools and their teachers to understand more about life in the community where the school is located, and some of the experiences and understandings about sustaining life students bring to school.

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Chapter 14

Dancing Koalas, Burning Books, and “Fair Game”: Using Butler’s Concept of Performativity to Examine Rural Gender Performances



Sherilyn Lennon

Abstract The research presented in this chapter was initially triggered by a desire to understand boys’ schooling (under)performances in my rural Australian hometown. In this community girls as a cohort resoundingly outperformed boys across all year levels and in nearly all disciplines. This performance divergence was first noticeable in Year 4 and continued to widen until students graduated at the end of Year 12. However, as my study evolved, I came to realise that the issue under investigation could not be fully understood or explained by focussing solely on the pedagogical practices and/or gender performances being enacted at the school site. Rather, I came to understand that boys’ schooling (under)performances were completely enmeshed in the material, discursive and affective *mutterings and matters* of the wider community. This chapter draws on posthumanist and New Materialist onto-epistemologies to identify some of the ways that seemingly disparate, isolated, and insignificant sayings, doings, and relating were working to inform and re-form schooling and gender performances in a small country town in Western Queensland.

On the eve of 2018, my adult family and I attended a 21st birthday party for a young woman on a sheep and cattle property in outback Queensland. The venue for this party was located at a property neighbouring our own. After thirty minutes of gate-opening and cross-country driving, we arrived to find approximately sixty guests of mixed ages, genders, and backgrounds wearing a diverse array of costumes portraying the theme, “Aussie icons”. Among the guests I could make out numerous Dame Edna Everages, a Kylie Minogue, a Ned Kelly, three Steve Irwins, a bottle of Bundaberg rum and a jar of vegemite. The majority of guests were young white adults whose families had lived in the district for generations. Many of the young men present either lived on farms where they worked for their fathers or in the local service town of 5000 residents where they worked as tradesmen. A limited few had returned from the state’s capital city for the party (an eight-hour roundtrip). Some of these were completing—or had completed—university degrees in the city. In contrast, most of

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the young women in attendance had completed/were completing university degrees. These disparate gendered life trajectories are not uncommon in rural communities and have been reported on extensively (see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Baxter et al., 2011; Lennon, 2015, 2017a).

At one point during the party a commotion broke out on the dance floor. Here a large group of revellers had formed a circle and begun to cheer. My interest piqued, I moved closer to investigate. There, in the middle of the crowd was a dancing koala—or, more accurately, an athletic male frame replete with riding boots, rugby shorts, a muscle shirt, and a fully enclosed koala mask. The dancing koala moved with such speed, dexterity, and liveliness that the other dancers had retired to the edges of the dance floor in order to allow the masked koala to perform. When the song finished, the *koala* removed his mask, handed it back to its rightful owner, and retreated to the nearby bar. Here he bunkered down—not dancing—for the remainder of the night. I was fascinated. What was it about the koala mask that had liberated this young man and given him licence to act in such an uncensored and joyous way? Why had he retreated from the dance floor so quickly once the mask had been removed? What had the koala mask unleashed in him that its removal now constrained? And what were the lessons—if any—to be gleaned from his performance for educators?

Rurality and Gender: A Co-constitutive Affair

In this chapter, I would like to take Butler's concept of gender performativity and queer it further through a collapsing together of rurality and gender so that the material, affective, and discursive forces that coalesce to regulate, shape, and reshape rural gender performances—including schooling performances—might be examined more closely. By adopting this conceptual approach, I recognise that I am entering posthumanist or, more specifically, New Materialist territory. According to Butler (2004), “[t]here is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human” (pp. 2–3). This departure authorises a framework that is able to position “gender as an effect of practice” (p. 72)—not something that individuals are born with or have the luxury of selecting. My approach allows for a re-envisioning of gender performances as inextricably linked to cultural contexts and schooling performances. By incorporating aspects of the material turn, things/phenomena such as words, masks, time, place, biographies and biologies, movements, encounters with others, and the rituals and realities of everyday life can be brought into play so that the dynamism of all matter might be considered (Barad, 2007). Merging poststructural and posthumanist tenets allows for gender to be understood as entangled in the bodily, temporal, affective *and* discursive forces, fluxes and flows that are always already operating in the world. Co-joining these theoretical frameworks positions gender and rural schooling performances as ongoing iterative enactments forever in a state of flux as a consequence of their entanglement with the “mutterings and matterings” of everyday life (Lennon, 2017b, p. 536).

While Butler has a tendency for re-centring the humanist subject (Kirby, 2002), confessing to being, “[n]ot a very good materialist...Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language” (Butler, 2004, p.198), her concept of performativity is useful for the way that it pushes understandings of gender beyond poststructuralist notions privileging language at the expense of the embodied and/or material. Adding posthumanist understandings allows the koala mask, the physical landscape, and the cultural and social context to be seen as mutually implicated in producing the young man’s shifting gender performances. The mask momentarily recasts him in a way that makes it possible for him to breach the community’s accepted gender norms barring him from dancing solo in public. It functions to instigate a fantasy version of the self whereby the young man is re-articulated thus making the impossible possible (Butler, 2004). In this chapter, I would like to take this idea and explore it further as a way of considering how restrictive gender performances that work to limit schooling performances might benefit from being re-imagined and re-articulated.

Kuby (2017) argues that “engaging with poststructural and posthumanist ideas, even if dense and difficult to read, offers hope for students, teachers, researchers, schools, and our world” (p. 882). By adopting Butler’s concept of gender performativity, and extending it to embrace rural performances, I wish to argue in this chapter for understandings of performances as iterative, contingent, and forever and always open to reproduction and/or transformation. Conceptualising gender through performativity foregrounds the ways that particular realities get actualised, reproduced, and, at times, rescripted. This has implications for how schooling underperformances might also be rewritten. Drawing from an extended study I conducted into boys’ disengagement from schooling in a small rural farming community in South-West Queensland (see Lennon, 2015, 2017b), I relate and then unpack instances wherein community members reproduced and/or re-wrote their rural gender performances as a consequence of their *intra-actions* (Barad, 2007) with the material, affective, and social world. For educators living and working in rural spaces, it is these moments of rewriting that are of significance. Not only do they illuminate the cost to individuals of reproducing toxic gender performances, they also suggest openings for educators wanting to disrupt and destabilise life-limiting gender beliefs and schooling performances.

Where I Fit in

With increasing rates of urbanisation, particularly in Western cultures, many researchers have little or no contact with those living in rural communities. Indeed, researchers can fall into the FIFO (Fly-in-fly-out) category in much the same way as Australian miners do. This can lead to an essentialising of rural performances and identities in a number of ways. They can be romanticised aka Banjo Paterson writing about the legendary *Clancy of the Overflow* in 1889:

And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
 In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
 And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,
 And at night the wond'rous glory of the everlasting stars

Alternatively, they can be pathologised as culturally, financially, and/or educationally lacking (Henderson & Lennon, 2014). It is important to acknowledge that *the rural*—and those who identify as such—are diverse and complex “with competing and layered conceptions of ... meaning and value” (Roberts, 2014, p. 143). As evidence of this complexity, may I present myself. While much of my work-life is spent at a large multi-campus university located in Queensland’s densely populated South-East corner, come the weekend, “home” becomes a wheat, cattle, and sheep property four hours west of my work-world. This dual existence sees me performing academia during the week while mustering stock on the weekends. Does my life spanning these two worlds and “perform[ing] a range of different selves” (Reid, 2013, p. 136) make me rural or urban? According to Pini, Moletsane, and Mills (2014) “[t]he rural, like gender, is messy, fluid and complicated” (p. 456). While some might consider me a fringe-dweller working the borderlands, one thing that my messy and complicated life has taught me is how embroiled in place are our daily practices and performances.

Coming to Know My Community

I was posted to Wheatville State High—a school at the heart of a farming community 400 kilometres west of the state’s capital city—by the State Education department in 1985. It was my first teaching position. I was 21, excited, passionate, enthusiastic, and naive. However, romantic imaginings of what life would be like as an English teacher in a small country town were quickly tempered by the everyday realities of keeping thirty hormone-fuelled teenagers engaged and on task. In particular, it was my inability to manage *the boys*¹ that afforded me countless sleepless nights during these formative teaching years. All too often, at the end of another (disastrous) day of teaching, I would lie awake at night dissecting where I had gone wrong and what I could do about it. My cause was not helped by a well-meaning male Deputy Principal who, in hindsight, misguidedly advised me to “be more assertive” and “show *the boys* who’s boss”. Many of the male students seemed highly motivated outside of school by such activities as football, pig hunting, motocross, or underage drinking; however, I found it nearly impossible to harness this motivation and direct it towards their studies. In those early years, I remember owning much of the blame for not being able to meet these students’ needs. It seemed to me that the harder I tried and the more assertive I became, the more resistant were some of the boys. It was not until

¹I understand all students as operating along a gender and academic continuum of possibilities that are themselves fluid. The italicised use of the term is a way of recognising its reductionist and essentialist common-use meaning.

a chance encounter with a fifteen-year-old boy nearly a decade into my teaching career that I finally began to see the issue of this community's underperforming boys differently. At the time I was the English Head of Department at the school. One of the responsibilities of this position was to "chase up" students who had failed to submit their assessment pieces by the due date. I was admonishing the student for not making adequate use of his class time when, from memory, the conversation went something like this:

Me: So Michael, if you don't complete this piece of assessment you won't pass English. If you don't pass English you can forget about any apprenticeships, a career in the defence force, or anything better than an unskilled labouring job. Is that really what you want? Is that really all you're capable of?

Michael: Miss, you don't know what you're talking about. I've already got three jobs lined up: I've got the option of a boiler making apprenticeship with my Uncle; I can go cotton contracting with Dad; or I've been offered a motor mechanic's apprenticeship at Robinson's. I don't need to pass English for any of them. In fact, I don't need to pass anything for any of them!

His reply stunned me. It was the first time that I had ever paused to consider the connection between boys' schooling (under)performances and the forces that shape lives outside of school. Michael's reluctance to complete his assignment would appear to have been enmeshed in local employers' expectations of its boys. Further research I conducted over the ensuing years revealed a pattern wherein boys in my community were 80–100% more likely than girls to secure an apprenticeship upon leaving school with girls 80–100% more likely than boys to secure a traineeship (see Lennon, 2009, 2015, 2017a). These clearly gendered post-school trajectories brought with them issues of financial and social inequality. The disparities that open up when certain members of a community have access to opportunities that others do not have implications for students' immediate and lifelong well-being as well as for teachers' pedagogical responsibilities.

Links Between Gender Performances and Schooling Performances

As far back as 2000 Cortis and Newmarch in their paper, *Boys in schools: What's happening*, identified rurality and hegemonic masculinity as factors impacting boys' schooling performances. They also added language barriers, socio-economic status, and locality to these factors. Performances steeped in versions of hypermasculinity that endorse misogyny and homophobia work to constitute performances for boys that are the binary opposite of those for girls. The naturalising of patriarchy into two opposing categories—male and female—makes use of a limiting gender binary that

can position boys' performances as static and biologically predetermined. This binary thinking gives rise to essentialist notions of gender wherein "one element is objectified as the Other, and ... viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled" (Hill Collins, 2002, p. 70). Gender binaries work to oppress those who do not prescribe to hegemonic constructions of masculinity: "The dual Others to normative heterosexual masculinities in schools are girls/women and non-macho boys/men" (Epstein, 2005, p. 263). Understanding this helped me to make sense of why the well-meaning male Deputy Principal's advice to "be more assertive" in my early years of teaching was so counterproductive. As the female *Other* in a world ruled by hypermasculine power, any attempt to assert authority over *the boys* was always going to be met with resistance and resentment. Binary thinking shuts down options for alternative gender performances as individuals become constrained by what they see as outlawed and disavowed in their particular communities. Enacting gender performances based on dualistic notions works to shut down the multifarious ways that individuals might perform their gender identities. Butler's (1990, 2004) concept of performativity helps to counter deterministic binary thinking by conceiving of gender as multiplicitous and shifting. She encourages "a mode of becoming that, in making otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone" (2004, p. 29). While Butler is specifically referring to members of the transgender and intersex communities with her work, her ideas are easily transposable to rural gender performances and have implications for educators working in these spaces. Such thinking permits rural gender performances to be positioned as being *done* (Butler, 1990) and *undone* (Butler, 2004) via an individual's material, discursive, and affective encounters/experiences of the world/classroom. Performativity routs the (mis)conception of gender identities as fixed, stable, and/or predetermined to replace it with notions of gender as contentious, iterative, and unstable. This then opens up pedagogical possibilities for educators seeking to create spaces where limiting gender binaries and their toxic manifestations into practice can be exposed, interrupted, and re-written. While risky work, the cost to communities of not doing so can be dire.

Links Between Gender Performances, Rural Performances, and Domestic Violence

It is becoming increasingly difficult in Australia to pick up a newspaper, watch the nightly news, or visit a social media site without reading or hearing another story of violence being perpetrated against females (see "Man accused over Hunter Valley car park death had been violent before, court hears" Cox, 2016; "Woman hospitalised after alleged family violence at shopping centre" unknown 2016; "Man charged with murder over tomahawk attack on pregnant woman" Stephens 2015; "Woman rushed to hospital after allegedly run off Gold Coast road by ex-partner" Huxley, 2015). Not unsurprisingly, this increased focus on violent gendered crimes linked to

intimate partner violence (IPV) has coincided with the recent endorsement of *The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The confronting report claims that, “One in three Australian women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15. Almost one in five have experienced sexual violence” (para. 1). What makes these figures even more perturbing is to read them in conjunction with another Australian study comparing statistics of IPV between women living in rural areas and their urban counterparts. Dillon et al. (2015) claim that data collected from a national health survey involving over 40,000 participants indicate that a disproportionate number of victims of gender-based violence are from Australian communities that are rural or remote. Citing a 2011 study by Grech and Burges, they claim that, “... in a study of domestic assaults reported to the NSW police over the 10-year period 2001-2010 ... the highest rates of domestic assaults ... were in rural or regional areas” (p. 19). Research (see Khalifeh et al., 2013; Wendt, 2009) suggests that a combination of geographic isolation from service and health providers, performances steeped in hypermasculinity, lower levels of education and income, and a reluctance on the part of the victims to *speak up* works to perpetuate increased cycles of violence against women in rural and remote communities. Increased levels of violence have their genesis in the financial, historical, material, and discursive practices that get normalised and reproduced in some rural communities. Students bring these ritualistic beliefs and practices into the classroom where they become entangled in some boys’ schooling (under)performances. The challenge for educators is how best to go about disrupting them.

Doing and Undoing Rural Gender Performances: Stories of Hope and Despair

Reid (2013), a teacher *cum* researcher with extensive experience living and working in rural Australia, argues for the importance of “speak[ing] back to dominant discourses of rural youth and masculinity” (p. 139). She gives an example of her teenage son and his school friends re-inventing themselves outside of school as activists and filmmakers as a way of suggesting the possibilities that can open up when young rural males are encouraged to re-articulate themselves in different and innovative ways. The boys she writes about embraced out-of-school literacy identities that operated in stark contrast to their more regulated and restricted in-school literacy performances. Ironically, schools’ desire for regimentation and conformity can act as both a barrier to alternative gender/literacy performances and, for some, an obstacle to be overcome (Keddie, 2007). The conflict that ensues can lead to disengagement from schooling; resistance to learning; and the harassment of female students, female teachers, and boys who do not fit the established gender norms. When performing

“male” becomes associated with resisting schooling and power over females, homophobia, femiphobia, and misogyny are its likely handmaidens (Keddie & Mills, 2007).

During research into issues around boys’ disengagement in my own community, I uncovered multiple incidences of sexual exploitation and/or violence against females and those perceived as not conforming to the community’s gender norms. In one interview I conducted, a woman told me of an incident in which she had been sexually assaulted by a member of the local rugby club during a break and enter. While she had initially found the courage to fight off her attacker, she had balked at the prospect of pressing charges against him. Her reasoning for this was:

Because he was [from] such a well to do family in town in such a small society it would have been hard for me to take it through the courts because of my [lengthy pause] accounting in town. I was known as a bit of a party girl.

The woman claimed that her past as a “bit of a party girl” positioned her as “fair game” for the attacker. She also believed that the attacker’s status in the community would make pressing charges against him extremely difficult. Her feelings of inadequacy reveal all too clearly the psychological and physical dangers of allowing a class-driven version of hypermasculinity to reign unchecked. Her response clearly demonstrates how the affective gets entangled with females’ complicity in their own subjugation. In this instance, the victim has rewritten herself as *less than* her attacker and, therefore, unworthy of remit. Butler (2004) argues that,

[T]he very terms that confer ‘humaness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human....[T]he question of power...is bound up with...the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not (p. 2).

Throughout the course of my research I heard stories of young boys who had been coerced and/or bullied at school because they were perceived by others as bookish, or feminine, or because they did not play football. In one interview, a male ex-student of mine—who went on to complete his doctorate in Science—related the following:

Mark: ...I don’t know if you remember Oliver Mathison?

Me: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: Well, he had the crap beaten out of him after school one day by one of the more macho types because he just didn’t like him because he [Oliver] was not the Mr Macho, Mr Poor Performing [academically] guy. So, the more macho types would have a real thing against those sorts of people and, I don’t know, just sort of try and pound them and sometimes literally.

Me: I had no idea. And you saw that as a way of them verifying their own versions of masculinity?

Mark: I think so. Yeah. ‘Here’s the pecking order. We are stronger. We can beat you up so don’t try and assert yourself or don’t try and climb the pecking order because here’s your position and it’s below the rest of us.’

Me: So, what does that do to the people who don’t fit the dominant mould?

Mark: Yeah, well it's better to be in the C grade of the football and perform badly because you're still part of the crowd. And then I guess outside of school they can just embrace the football drinking culture and keep playing in the C grade and be a part of that ... They can run on; do badly; have a beer and everything's cool.

Viewing his high school days retrospectively, Mark went on to tell me that, "It was just stupid" that he had pursued a Maths/Science agenda at school and later in life instead of an Arts-based one. He elaborated using metaphors such as "social camouflage" and the wearing of a mask to describe how he had deceived himself and others in his pursuit of the Sciences—first at high school and later in his career. In acquiescing to, what he saw as, an appropriate performance of rural masculinity, he spent 15 years of his life employed in a field that he essentially found unfulfilling. Even more tragic was his story, as a young teen, of burning all of his childhood writings. This act—motivated by his father's disparaging comments about boys who read books—represented a symbolic letting go of that part of his identity that he felt was being outlawed in a community valorising an exaggerated version of masculinity for its boys. It was not until his mid-30s—nearly twenty years after he left the community—that Mark changed his career path from Science to the Arts and became a professional photographer and published author. Physical and temporal distance had finally given him the space to pursue his passions and perform a version of masculinity free from the restrictive forces patrolling his childhood.

The same theme of creative suppression was also apparent in an interview I conducted with a woman in her 60s. She told me the story of her son, Mattie, a successful artist and singer (now in his 30s) who, according to his mother, had felt obliged to play football and study Science and Maths during his schooling years: "[H]e didn't show any inclination towards Art all through secondary school. This was something that happened when he got older, his interest in the Arts". While Mattie's mother seems content in her belief that her son's interest in the Arts emerged later in life—as opposed to having been suppressed throughout his schooling years—she does acknowledge that he played football "unhappily" and later regretted abstaining from singing lessons at his private boys' boarding school as a result of peer group pressure. Mattie is now an award-winning artist with his own inner-city gallery. Like Mark, it would appear that physical and temporal distance have given him the space needed to rewrite himself.

As a researcher and educator who has called Wheatville "home" for many decades, stories such as these have had a profound effect on me. Prior to conducting my research, I had never really considered the long-term implications for adolescent and young adult males of the unrelenting forces of hegemonic masculinity bearing down on them. The students that I had worried about when teaching had been the boys who had pursued the Arts and/or academia and, in so doing, openly defied gender norms constituting them as football players and/or poor-performing students. I did not realise at the time the high price that many of the boys were paying for their inclusion into the fraternity that is hegemonic masculinity.

These stories underline the cost to individuals of the dominant culture overwriting them. In gaining broader community acceptance, Mark and Mattie had remade themselves in order to conform to community gender expectations. In the process they had sacrificed a part of themselves. It would appear that the concept of the iterative and fluid self forever being reinscribed is not always governed by emancipatory acts of reinvention. At times it might be more appropriate to describe such reinventions as anti-liberatory acts or *un-doings*. There is a much-needed role for teachers living in rural communities to create spaces where performances linked to hegemonic masculinity and its ugly cousins, hypermasculinity and phallocentrism,² can be checked and reigned in. Some of the stories presented in this chapter hint at how this might be achieved.

Unmasking and Re-masking Rural Gender Performances

The metaphorical and/or literal concept of wearing a mask as a form of social camouflage—as articulated by Mark and demonstrated by the dancing koala—is useful for illuminating some of the ways that gender performances get enacted, reproduced, and, at times, disrupted. However, the mask concept also hints at pedagogical possibilities for educators wanting to disrupt life-limiting gender performances by demonstrating how matter comes to matter (Carlile et al., 2013). Contrastingly, in the instance of Mark, the metaphorical mask has *intra-acted* (Barad, 2007) with him to co-produce a performance of rural masculinity pathologising difference and limiting and controlling his desire to pursue the Arts. In the instance of the dancing koala, the literal mask has coalesced with the male dancer to liberate him from those gender realities that limit and confine. Whether metaphorical or literal, masks make it possible for individuals to rearticulate themselves in ways that are able to reproduce—or, alternatively, destabilise toxic gender performances. Recognising this has pedagogical implications for educators working in spaces where gender performances limit student performances and, by association, lives. Teachers would do well to consider how they might create spaces that give students permission to recast their gender performances in ways that—literally or figuratively—permit them to “dance”. This approach has particular implications for teachers of drama, film, dance, subject English, and theatre.

Merging poststructural and posthumanist understandings of rural gender performances help to position gender as capable of being regulated and/or transformed by the material, social, temporal, affective, and discursive forces policing and pestering who we are, what we do, and who we are always becoming. This conceptual understanding has the power to change how we think about students’ underperformances and the pedagogical approaches educators might deploy when seeking to disrupt

²This term refers to constructions of masculinity based on dominance and power over others through the symbol of the phallus or sexual superiority. Phallocentrism privileges elite all-male groups while subordinating those who do not belong to these groups.

toxic and inequitable gender beliefs steeped in heteropatriarchal practices and performances. According to Butler “[f]antasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real, it points, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (pp. 216–217). This chapter has highlighted the usefulness of metaphorical and/or literal masks for opening up possibilities that permit individuals to reimagine themselves in ways that create more liveable lives. Surely, this is the ultimate goal of all educators.

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Chapter 15

Harnessing Social Capital in Rural Education Research to Promote Aspiration and Participation in Learning



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Abstract This chapter draws on experience of rural education research projects from early childhood to adult learning to explore how rural places can promote aspiration and participation in learning. It considers research about non-classroom learning environments offered by rural places and discusses the utility of social capital in both research design and as an analytical framework to explore the influence of ‘rural place’ in promoting (or otherwise) aspiration and participation in learning. It presents vignettes from four rural learning research projects to expose elements of good practice in rural research. These include understanding and being respectful to place and its values, developing trust, respecting the contributions of rural people, and communicating in non-academic language the aims of research including benefits for both community and researchers. The chapter argues that authentic, multifaceted research partnerships that build social capital between researchers and community can yield mutually beneficial outcomes for researchers and rural communities, including fostering participation of underrepresented groups in post-school education and training.

Introduction

Rural places exhibit a wide variety of landscapes and climates. Their social and economic profile varies widely as well, with different mixes of mining, agriculture of all sorts, manufacturing, tourism, and services. Some places are disadvantaged, some

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wealthy, and many have a mixed socio-economic and cultural make up. Place-specific factors and the diversity of experiences of rural people contribute to differences in aspiration for, and ability to, participate in post-school education (Fray et al., 2019). What is common amongst rural places is a degree of geographic isolation from other places and associated perceived spatial boundaries which we argue acts to highlight local contextual physical, economic, and social features. Another common factor is that rural areas in countries including Australia have traditionally had lower rates of higher education participation and attainment than metropolitan areas (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Belasco & Trivette, 2015). It is not that rural people do not aspire to higher education: recent research has confirmed, for example, that Australian students from rural regions translate desire to attend university into expectation of participation at lower rates than their metropolitan counterparts (Vernon et al., 2017). This chapter explores the influence of ‘rural place’ in learning, with a focus on how the context of a rural place and its social capital can be harnessed to promote aspiration and participation in learning through research partnerships.

This chapter introduces a number of ‘factors of rurality’ which coalesce in rural places to affect educational and career aspiration, and expectation of further participation in education and learning. These factors either do not apply to urban populations or are factors whose effect may be experienced more intensely by rural populations. They include:

- geographic distance and isolation (Alloway et al., 2004; Bradley et al., 2008; James, 2001)
- financial disadvantage (Alloway et al., 2004; Polesel, 2009)
- attachment to place and community (Webb et al., 2015)
- ability to articulate a different vision for the future (Mavelli, 2014)
- employment opportunities (Kenyon et al., 2001)
- exposure to higher education and its benefits (Alloway et al., 2004; Gale et al., 2013; Gemici et al., 2014; Kenyon et al., 2001)
- family history and influence, and overlapping professional and social networks (Alloway et al., 2004; Gemici et al., 2014; James et al., 1999; Kenyon et al., 2001; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002a)
- navigational capacity, archives of experience from one’s own and known others’ experience of navigating educational pathways (Appadurai, 2004; Gale et al., 2013; O’Shea, 2016)
- access to information (Appadurai, 2004; Baik et al., 2015; Gale & Parker, 2015b; Sellar et al., 2011)
- educational cultural capital, or those social assets which can be used to get ahead in terms of educational attainment (Gale & Parker, 2015a; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002b; Sullivan, 2001)
- school capacity (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2014; Welch et al., 2007; Weldon, 2016)
- capacity to succeed as an independent learner using online and blended learning modes (Kilpatrick & Bound, 2003; Park et al., 2015; Stone, 2017).

These factors of rurality help shape the way rural education research is 'done' (White & Corbett, 2014). This chapter adopts a social capital analytical frame to explain how programme or activity design has crafted learning experiences in rural places that address the factors of rurality, and how these programmes and activities draw on and build rural community social capital to impact aspiration and perception of attainability of education and career outcomes for adults and young people (James, 2001). The chapter concludes by considering how a social capital approach to rural research and learning can benefit both researchers and rural communities.

Social capital theories explain how social ties or networks influence behavioural norms, particularly in relation to education (Coleman, 1990; Shah et al., 2012) and have been used to show how social networks contribute to social reproduction by creating privileged access to resources including education. Social capital and educational cultural capital (Gale & Parker, 2015a; Whitty et al., 2015) can be used to understand social and economic disadvantage and rural communities' access to, and use of, resources for achieving outcomes such as education. Navigational capacity, or the ability to locate information and supports and move along pathways to alternate futures (Gale & Parker, 2015b; O'Shea, 2016), can be used to access crucial practical 'knowing the ropes' information that, for example, allows smooth transition to higher education (Whitty et al., 2015); navigational capacity is a resource linked to 'freedom to achieve' (Sen, 1992). Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction suggests that advantaged children's educational attainment is explained by their family's 'educational' cultural capital (Sullivan, 2001). Other researchers have confirmed that educational cultural capital at least partially explains educational attainment (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Sullivan, 2001).

Our analytical frame is adapted from Kilpatrick et al. (2003) who propose a social capital framework based on knowledge and identity resources (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000) to analyse community development initiatives, such as those that inform aspirations for further education and which promote lifelong learning. Knowledge resources of networks and knowing how to 'get things done' come together with identity resources, or the ability and willingness to act for a purpose, to produce social capital, and expose social capital being used. Schuller et al. (2004) introduce the concept of identity capital to help understand learning. Identity capital includes non-tangible individual assets of self-esteem, capacity to understand, and capacity to negotiate opportunities and obstacles encountered through life. In areas such as higher education, participation requires a set of norms and values that require identity adaptation on the part of students from non-traditional backgrounds (de Vreeze et al., 2018). Like social capital, identity capital is both an input into and outcome from learning. We include identity capital as a subset of social capital identity resources.

Our framework posits that social capital can be observed as relationships and partnerships within rural communities and with external agents are set in motion. The actions of formal and informal leaders and other respected and credible 'boundary crossers' who move between groups within communities and across external community boundaries (Kilpatrick et al., 2002), as well as the actions of community members themselves, expose social capital at work. The framework was applied to analyse the following four case studies. These case studies are not intended to be in depth exposés

of the larger theoretical issues presented above, but are examples of the different ways in which social capital and partnerships can promote learning in rural contexts.

Case Studies

The four case studies are ‘Volunteering at Agfest’, an investigation of informal adult learning through volunteering at an agricultural event; ‘Pathways to Success’, a partnership with industry that incorporates rural place into curriculum; ‘Rural Aspirations’, a model for university outreach to small rural communities; and ‘Community Learning Plans’ (CLPS) as strategic partnerships with rural communities in order to promote lifelong learning.

Volunteering at ‘Agfest’, Tasmania’s Major Rural Event

Agfest is Tasmania’s major rural event and recognised as one of the top three field days in Australia. The event is run solely by Rural Youth Organisation of Tasmania volunteers, 60% of whom are under 30 years old, and most are rural community members. Consistent with Tasmanian statistics, Agfest volunteers are typically less likely to have engaged in formal learning and/or higher education. In 2015, a study was commissioned by Rural Youth as part of a partnership with the University of Tasmania. In this year, 65,794 patrons and 120 volunteers participated in Agfest. The study sought to understand the reasons for volunteering at Agfest and the adult learning attached to this experience.

The exploratory, mixed-method study comprised a face-to-face survey with volunteers and follow up semi-structured interviews about motivations for, and benefits of, volunteering. Thematic coding of interview data analysed how volunteers’ capability and skills were developed through social networks, if confidence and other resources were built through the experience, and how the role contributed to aspirations for future training and learning.

The study findings indicated that Agfest brings people who are geographically dispersed together in a learning community through volunteering and engagement with others. Motivations for volunteering were focused around education and training, civic service, and social interactions. Volunteer benefits related to new skills, increased confidence and leadership development, a sense of achievement and pride, and expansion of social capital networks. Agfest builds on volunteers’ experience of rural life and occupations to develop new, generic, transferrable skills. Rural Youth leaders recognised the different types of learning, skills, and knowledge amongst participants which could be used to promote further learning and capacity amongst its young rural volunteers and exposes skills not necessarily recognised or valued by those who hold them.

Given the research was part of a larger, ongoing partnership between Rural Youth and the University of Tasmania, there was increased engagement of volunteers as participants. Rural Youth leaders acted as boundary crossers between the domains of researchers and volunteers. Having leaders introduce researchers, built volunteers' trust of the process and researchers, and facilitated a high level of research participation. Face-to-face surveys conducted in a collegial meal break space made participation part of volunteers' normal activities, and not onerous or intimidating; this technique further built trust of researchers by people who had limited or no experience of a university or research, some with low literacy. Learnings from the research were:

- Insider-outsider dynamics: importance of social capital resources of key influencers for access and meaningful participant engagement;
- Importance of constructive, plain language communication of results back to project stakeholders within the rural context;
- Maintaining trust-based relationships and engaging stakeholders throughout the research process to ensure findings are accurate and fairly represent key issues through the lens of participants;
- The use of rural places and events as settings by which to explore the nature and impact of informal adult learning on volunteers.

Pathways to Success

The University of Tasmania's *Pathways to Success and a Place in Tasmania's Future Economy* was a three-year, Department of Education's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program funded project. It involved more than 8000 school aged and adult learners, 55 schools, and 134 businesses and organisations. The project aimed to increase participation in higher education by disadvantaged Tasmanians through multiple initiatives which informed and built aspiration; provided smooth transitions; and enabled current and future students, families, and communities to engage with career possibilities aligned with Tasmania's industries of the future. Such industries included food, advanced manufacturing, tourism, and health. The project evaluation investigated which initiatives and features were most effective in achieving the project aims.

Partnerships with schools, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), and industry in design of initiatives were a feature of the project. The action research approach included design, pilot, and evaluation of initiatives for school and TAFE students, adult learners, and teachers. The evaluation's mixed-method design gathered and analysed data from university systems, surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Evaluation participants were school and TAFE students, adult learners, teachers, principals, industry and community representatives, and university and organisational stakeholders.

A variety of project initiatives were designed and trialled to determine those most effective and valued by project partners. The evaluation found two-thirds of student

participants indicated that no one in their immediate family had undertaken higher education. The project connected with the Australian Curriculum and industry in an engaging way by developing partnerships with industry and schools to design and deliver interventions in engaging non-classroom settings in order to inform young Tasmanians' understandings and aspirations regarding educational and career pathways and opportunities. These partnerships continued beyond the project's life through creation and building of social capital networks and resources of trust. The evaluation indicated that one of the project's strongest attributes was use of industry representatives as role models and mentors, demystification of cultural misconceptions about higher education, and use of rural places as authentic non-classroom environments for learning. Teachers reported an intention to continue using the learning activities in their teaching; industry participants have volunteered to continue; and some initiatives have been embedded within university, Department of Education and other organisations' programmes (Woodroffe et al., 2017).

Consideration of factors of rurality helped build educational cultural capital for students and navigational capacity of teachers and students. Use of project staff to 'translate' between industry and educators to coordinate activities facilitated genuine communication and effective working partnerships. Learnings from the research were:

- Development of authentic cross-sectoral partnerships between education and industry optimises mutual benefit from partners' engagement in educational activities;
- Considering context, strengths, current issues, and community conversations in developing programmes and resources is critical to providing fit for purpose, rural place-based learning;
- Educational research interventions in rural communities which build on community resources, existing strengths, and opportunities are more relevant and visible.

Rural Aspirations

Rural Aspirations developed and trialled three outreach initiatives each targeting a different rural cohort: primary school children (Children's University, South Australia), high school students (Rural University Preparation Program [RUPP], New South Wales), and adults (Warm Connections, Tasmania). Funded by the Department of Education's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, the programme design was intended to address the factors of rurality listed above.

Children's University aimed to foster lifelong learning and introduce children to university (University of Adelaide 2016). The model has been found to have a positive impact on children's future participation in higher education in the UK (MacBeath, 2012). Activities were modified to be accessible to rural students. RUPP modified an existing face-to-face university preparation programme for senior secondary students to operate in two rural high schools and to include online modules with resource

support from rural town libraries. University students from rural backgrounds acted as mentors, sharing their experiences of the practicalities of managing finances, travel, and accommodation, and building navigational capacity (Appadurai, 2004; Gale & Parker, 2013). Warm Connections was designed to embed the presence of university and TAFE in eight rural communities. Partnerships were developed with local libraries and neighbourhood houses. Their staff were trained to provide local adults with front-line information and connections to people in university and TAFE whom staff had met through campus visits.

The research aimed to identify aspects of higher education outreach programmes in rural communities which appear to be effective in addressing factors of rurality—revealing obscured future options and showing higher education pathways to be attainable. The project approach and evaluation used a largely qualitative design, consistent with the project’s practical, action research, and community development nature (Patton, 1990). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with programme facilitators, teachers and community organisation staff, as well as a survey of RUPP participants.

The Children’s University intervention had limited success, mainly attributable to challenges of developing new rural partnerships from a distant city campus. RUPP was highly effective with 100% of participants enrolling in university and remaining enrolled after one semester. Contributing factors included: school student mentorship by young, rural university students; and making alternative futures transparent, realistic, and attainable. Warm Connections created safe and welcoming spaces where rural adults could access information through trusted, trained locals in familiar local environments.

Universities should understand and consider how cohorts within a community are impacted by factors of rurality when designing outreach programmes. Development of ‘people rich’ partnerships with institutions and organisations in rural communities is key to effective interventions. Local institutions and organisations are part of rural communities’ interactional infrastructure (Kilpatrick & Loechel, 2004) and provide access to community social capital that rural students can draw on as they transition to higher education. Universities can work effectively with rural communities, using the social capital and other resources of both, to expose alternative education pathways and the associated work and life trajectories.

Action research that drew on community strengths and built on existing relationships engaged partners; the Children’s University intervention was not built on strong relationships and was thus perhaps less successful. Factors of rurality were explicitly addressed in intervention design, for example RUPP provided participants with the ability to articulate a different vision for the future, and Warm Connections provided local access to information and navigational resources. Learnings from the research were:

- The importance of authentic partnerships with rural communities in promoting aspiration and participation in educational activities;

- The effectiveness of designing research interventions to be relevant to rural communities' contexts, building on existing strengths and opportunities, and drawing on place and local people.

Community Learning Plans (CLPs) in Two Rural Communities

Local governments have been instrumental in CLPs nationwide. CLPs are intended to change engagement in, and attitudes to, learning through the development of learning policy frameworks and implementation of strategies based around the framework. The researchers were engaged on CLP projects by two rural local government councils (referred to here as Council A and Council B). Council A engaged the researchers following work over several years on a community health plan, initially to develop a CLP and, subsequently, to develop an implementation plan. They were later engaged by Council B to identify baseline quantitative and qualitative data against which their existing CLP could be evaluated. The researchers had 20 years of research engagement with Council B. The two rural areas exhibited common educational attainment characteristics and the communities had a similar desire to act to ensure that residents could participate fully in the changing society and economy. The research aimed to determine factors that contribute to effective development and implementation of a CLP in a small rural community.

Participatory-based research processes used in both communities saw well-attended community workshops and 'focus groups' of key players: businesses, education, and training providers from early childhood to University of the Third Age. Data from these were supplemented by interviews to hone in on issues. Maturity of the community coalitions in working together and with external agents for the purpose of creating the CLPs were analysed using a framework adapted from Kilpatrick et al. (2008) which highlights the maturity and efficacy of social capital and leadership resources. Framework indicators are: leadership balance and contribution of community actors and external agents; trusted relationships with external agents and professional procedures; external links and networks; knowledge of the community's learning resources; openness to new ideas and willingness to mould opportunities to match vision; and evaluation and reflective learning.

Concepts of social capital, relationships, partnerships, and enabling leadership that create a shared vision are key factors contributing to effective development and implementation of CLPs in rural communities and appear to be predictors of community ability to act to enhance lifelong learning. Council leadership was a transformational, collaborative, and enabling process in both areas (Al-Sawai, 2013). Both Councils provided resources and legitimised CLP development and implementation processes. Both were key in communicating a vision of lifelong learning. They instilled a message of collective purpose, facilitated dialogue and engagement between stakeholder groups, and were willing to accept risks associated with working outside the traditional 'roads, rubbish, and rates' Council responsibilities. Both CLP

processes reflected presence and use of social capital: they benefited from established, trusted relationships with external agents and professional procedures, were open to new ideas, and took an evidence-based approach that included evaluation and reflective learning. Council B had spent many years building a shared vision for community learning, and had a more mature, shared knowledge of the community's learning resources and willingness to grasp an opportunity and take a risk in developing Tasmania's first CLP.

Action research that built on existing relationships, engaged partners, and drew on the strong value assigned to the communities' own beliefs and experiences encouraged holistic community ownership of the CLPs. Actions developed tapped into attachment to place and community and addressed other factors of rurality that work against educational participation. Learnings from the research were:

- Benefits of long-term researcher relationships that build understanding of rural place and trust of communities;
- CLPs are most effective when developed in ongoing consultation with community. Community leaders and researchers each bring different, complementary skills to a research partnership—they must respect each other's perspective, and communicate in mutually understandable language;
- Research should give community useful, practical strategies they can implement to encourage educational aspiration and participation.

Implications and Conclusion

The case studies presented in this chapter highlight in different ways how rural places can act in diverse and unique approaches to promote aspirations and participation in learning, and how cross-sectoral partnerships can be used to support such opportunities. Authentic, multifaceted research partnerships are most likely to yield mutually beneficial educational research outcomes that enhance rural communities' social capital, navigational capacity, and educational cultural capital while delivering quality research outputs for researchers.

The geographic isolation of rural places imposes spatial boundaries that act to highlight local contextual social and physical characteristics. While each rural community is different, the features of good research practice are common. They include understanding of, and being respectful to, the place and its values, genuinely valuing the contributions of rural people, and communicating in non-academic language that explains the research and what is 'in it' for both community and researchers. Building trust, with the expectation of a long-term relationship and drawing on the community's social capital (e.g. informal as well as formal leaders) to access the community, assists in developing a culture of working *with* rather than *in* or *on* the community, and enhances the relevance and quality of research outcomes. The case studies reveal a common theme of capacity building stemming

from informal learning. This is part of a partnership-based research process underpinned by a social capital theoretical base and the relevance of a social capital framework for working with community to design and evaluate interventions. A social capital research approach recognises the value of learning in building the capacity of individuals and communities and can promote participation in post-school learning.

A social capital framework is useful for more than analytic purposes—it is essential when thinking about research design and assists researchers to establish and maintain authentic and long-lasting partnerships that deliver mutual benefits to researchers and rural communities. Such a framework is easily transferred to non-rural education research contexts and is especially appropriate when there is a social or cultural distance between researchers and their research context. There are implications for the theory and research approach in other locations, particularly when working with disadvantaged communities or where students are marginalised and grouped in schools based on cultural or socio-economic characteristics.

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Chapter 16

The Invisible Cohort: Remote Students' Engagement and Success in Higher Education



Louise Pollard, Judy Skene, and Grady Venville

Abstract This chapter applies a remote lens to the experience of rural students in higher education. Students from remote locations are usually subsumed within the regional students' cohort for policy and support purposes. In a country as vast as Australia, their location and previous educational experience may mean that they face unique challenges undertaking university (Cassells et al., 2017). Their expectations and support needs may differ from their regional and metropolitan peers, as evidenced by the fact that currently remote students have one of the highest attrition rates for any undergraduate cohort in Australia. Without dedicated policy and practical support, these students may struggle to achieve their higher education goals.

A remote lens can explore the intersections between educational theory and the delivery of a quality student experience to ask whether remote students' needs are being met in current policy and practice. This chapter presents an analysis of national data sets and qualitative case studies of remote students at three universities to establish the defining characteristics of the cohort. Then theoretical perspectives summarised in established frameworks of the student experience and student equity, which inform development of university strategies, are reviewed for their relevance for remote students (Bennett et al., 2015; Kahu, 2013; Kift, 2009, 2015). Findings will inform approaches to tailor policy and practical support to the small but distinctive cohort of remote students and progress the assertion that specific needs of particular groups of students merit attention to ensure all students receive the best support possible.

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Introduction

Students from remote and very remote regions of Australia often are an invisible cohort in higher education. Due to the small numbers of students involved, their data are usually conflated with those of regional students for reporting and analysis purposes. Yet this group of students is distinctive in its composition and although the challenges they face may be similar to those of regional students, the nature and severity is often more extreme, given their remote locations. Remote students have lower completion rates (60.08%) than their metropolitan (74.82%) and regional (69.56%) peers, a compelling reason to research the factors that contribute to their success at university (Department of Education, 2019).

This research applied a remote lens to regional student data from the Department of Education and Training (DET) to reveal the unique demographics of the remote student cohort. The analysis informed further research into how policy and practice can best support students from remote Australia to be successful in their studies. Whilst the challenges that regional students encounter in accessing and successfully completing university studies are well documented (Cardak et al., 2017), there is a gap in our knowledge of the impact of living in or transferring from remote Australia to undertake higher education studies. The qualitative data collected in case studies of three universities that enrolled substantial numbers of remote students helped to provide a rich picture of the experiences of these students.

The characteristics of the remote student cohort show that remote students are not just relocating school leavers, but a sizeable proportion are instead mature age, part-time, and studying online remotely. There is also a higher proportion of students belonging to two or more of Australia's six designated equity groups in this cohort. The cumulative impact of multiple equity group membership is difficult to assess, as individuals respond differently to their circumstances, and indeed, the research revealed the resilience and creativity of remote students, alongside the challenges they faced. However, equity group membership is a useful indicator at a cohort level of financial and other forms of disadvantage—these factors indicate a group of students with complex support needs who could be considered as a test case for effective student support. If we design learning and teaching strategies and support programmes that facilitate success for remote students, then the resulting initiatives will have benefits across the whole student population.

From a theoretical perspective, the key drivers of student success are often summarised in frameworks of the student experience and student equity. These frameworks are invaluable tools to guide development of strategic initiatives in student support and teaching and learning strategies. They capture key principles based on the whole student population or all equity groups; however, this strength may also be a weakness if there are groups of students whose needs are not adequately covered. Through applying insights from remote students, the efficacy of these frameworks as they apply to this complex cohort can be assessed.

Background

Remote students studying at university in Australia complete their studies at a significantly lower rate than their regional or metropolitan peers (60.08% compared to 69.5% for regional and 74.82% for metropolitan students) (Department of Education, 2019). These figures indicate that remote students as a group would benefit from targeted support by university services, especially in transition.

Australia has been classified into regions by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, based on the level of geographical isolation faced by the community. The DET uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011 Australian Statistical Geography Standard: Remoteness Structure to define remoteness. It is calculated using a broad range of ABS social and demographic statistics and divides each state/territory into regions on the basis of their access to services including health and education (Pink, 2011). It is built using Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1) regions that are generally the smallest unit available to isolate census data and have an average population of 400 people per SA1 region (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In 2016, whilst the DET's definition of remoteness remained the same, a new measure for how students are identified and classified was introduced. Students are classified as being remote, based on their permanent home address at the time of enrolment at the beginning of the academic year. In 2016, this was complemented with a measure where students were classified as remote based on their permanent home address at the time they first commenced study.

Australian universities collect and report domestic undergraduate student data each semester, including data on access, participation, retention, and completion for six designated equity groups: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (referred hereafter as Indigenous students); students with disability; from low socioeconomic background (LSES); from non-English speaking background (NESB); women in non-traditional areas (WINTA); and regional and remote students. Student equity data inform policy for equitable access and participation for these under-represented groups. Australia was a world leader in 1990 when the groundbreaking report 'A Fair Chance for All' (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990) established student equity categories and affirmed performance targets with the Martin indicators (Martin and Department of Employment Education and Training, 1994). Various reviews in the ensuing decades have maintained these designations, although terminology has changed, as in 'rural and isolated' becoming 'regional and remote'. This has provided a wealth of longitudinal data which records progress of each group, relative to the overall domestic cohort and each other. The record reveals, for example, that substantial government funding since 2008 to improve access and participation for LSES students has had a positive impact but less benefit for regional and remote participation. This is despite significant overlap for the two groups, especially for LSES and remote students. This finding (Koshy, 2017) was instrumental as a rationale for undertaking this research to investigate factors that contributed to success for remote students.

Although retention is a concern for universities, there is ongoing debate in Australian higher education about the definition of student success and the degree to which completion equals success. Some students leave before completing because they have employment opportunities or have learned the skill or knowledge they desired. Separation before completion is not necessarily failure (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017). Many students who leave intend to resume their studies and do, usually when their circumstances are more amenable to managing the demands of study, but these students may not be captured in completion data. Factors contributing to decisions to complete or leave are complex and cannot be easily resolved by a focus on ‘fixing the student’ or ‘fixing the university’ (Nelson et al., 2017). There is tension between acknowledging that cohort data indicate higher levels of attrition than metropolitan students and avoiding a deficit narrative. Nevertheless, there are financial and emotional costs for students who leave university with a debt and no qualification because they felt unwilling or unable to continue. If we subscribe to the view that location should not influence access to higher education or determine one’s ability to succeed, then the attrition rate for remote students is unacceptably high in comparison with metropolitan students and there are opportunities to improve their student experience, by being more inclusive and responsive as a sector.

Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed methods approach, using quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the university experience of students from remote Australia. The research question was: What are the principles of good practice that support the success of university students who come from remote Australia? The research was supported by an Equity Fellowship funded by the Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, through the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education awarded to Louise Pollard in 2017 (2018).

The quantitative phase of this study collated data from the Australian government’s statistical collection that separated remote students from regional data sets, to establish a profile of remote students as a distinct group. The qualitative research involved case studies of three universities that enrolled substantial numbers of remote students. Case study method captures the rich detail that emerges from interviews of staff and students and allows the contextual analysis, supported by institutional documents such as strategic plans (Yin, 1984). Case study method is considered a useful tool in fields like educational evaluation and the social sciences at the early stage of theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies are often exploratory in their intent to learn from evidence collected and descriptive in their approach, as in this study.

The voices of remote students are frequently absent from accounts of the student experience, so students were interviewed at each university. The 14 student interviewees included undergraduate, postgraduate students, and relocating students as well as some who chose to study remotely. In addition, 13 staff were interviewed:

11 professional staff and two academics. All were involved in designing and implementing programmes to support the student experience. Interviews were transcribed and then manually coded for themes, which were collated across all three universities. The three universities represent different jurisdictions, university networks, and were selected based on their relatively high population of remote students. Pseudonyms have been used for the three institutions:

University of the Hinterlands: Majority of students are enrolled online, with residential accommodation available for students who relocate to study on campus.

University of the Coast: Relatively small student population including a significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population with the majority of students enrolled online.

University of the Metropolis: Large student population where the majority of students study on campus with residential accommodation available for relocating students.

Identifying the Invisible Cohort

The analysis of national data revealed the unique profile of the remote student cohort. The distinctiveness of this cohort is largely hidden when the data are reported together with regional students' data because remote students are less than 5% of the total cohort. Table 16.1 examines different characteristics of the 2016 student data broken down into metropolitan, regional, remote, and regional and remote (University Statistics Team, 2017):

Notable differences between the remote student cohort and the regional cohort are that a higher proportion study online, mostly in their home community, and these students are more likely to be 25 years or older and/or studying part-time. Women are over-represented (67.85%) and one-third of the cohort is from LSES backgrounds. Of note, 9.59% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, in contrast with regional (3.55%) and particularly with metropolitan Indigenous participation (1.18%). Based on this data, it is apparent that remote students have a distinct identity that needs to be acknowledged in practice, policy, and research. The recommendation by Pollard (2018) that remote students should be considered a separate equity group in their own right was endorsed in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019) but has not been enacted.

Two distinct profiles of students emerge when examining the remote cohort based on their mode of study. The two profiles, presented in Table 16.2, show that the majority (86%) are either one of two groups: students remaining in community and studying online, or relocating campus-based students. In addition, the remaining 14% of remote students study mix-modal, some on campus and some in community. These students are not included in the two profiles presented below, but strategies that take into account that many remote students study online and in remote regions should capture their circumstances and support needs.

Table 16.1 Student cohort summary (Domestic students categorised by geographical region in 2016)

	Metro	Regional	Remote	Regional and Remote
Total number of students enrolled	812,277	217,253	9,945	227,198
Students studying externally/online	16.75%	31.29%	45.30%	31.90%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	1.18%	3.27%	9.59%	3.55%
Students enrolled part-time	33.02%	36.47%	44.62%	36.83%
High socio-economic status backgrounds	40.90%	9.94%	6.15%	9.78%
Low socio-economic status backgrounds	12.46%	30.23%	32.89%	30.35%
Gender: Female	56.76%	62.93%	67.85%	63.15%
Male	43.24%	37.07%	32.15%	36.85%
Age: 19 and under	27.15%	24.32%	21.51%	24.19%
20–24	35.52%	34.06%	26.85%	33.75%
25–34	20.62%	20.83%	23.93%	20.97%
35 and over	16.71%	20.79%	27.70%	21.09%

Table 16.2 Two profiles of remote students in 2016

ONLINE STUDENT (45.3% of the cohort) Studying remotely	CAMPUS-BASED STUDENT (40.7% of the cohort) Relocate for study
Part-time (73%), full-time (27%)	Full-time (79%), part-time (21%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population (9%)	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population (10%)
Age (35 and over—45% of group)	Age (19 and under—39% of the group)
Female (73%)	Female (60%)
Low SES (33%)	Low SES (31%)
Undergraduate enrolments (57%); Post Graduate enrolments (35%)	Undergraduate enrolments (80%); Post Graduate enrolments (16%)

Remote Students' Perspectives

The two profiles that emerged from analysis of the quantitative data were reinforced by qualitative data from the interviews. All students interviewed were well advanced in their degrees and had successfully transitioned to university study.

Financial support was an important element raised by many of the students interviewed. Access to income support from the Australian Government continues to be

an important source of income for many remote students. However, students were only able to access support if they studied full-time. One of the students, receiving income support whilst studying online from their home community, outlined the challenges faced when completing the application process when living in remote Australia:

I tried to get Centrelink and the office was three hours away. I did the work with Centrelink myself... For the first two years it was difficult... It almost cost me more money in phone calls. It did get it cleared up and it has [since] been pretty good. (Online student studying full time, University of the Coast)

Students spoke of the significant financial cost associated with relocating for study:

There are students in my town who could not go to university as they could not afford the living costs. Also, there are students in college who drop out because of financial stress. (Online student who relocated for study, school leaver, University of Hinterlands)

Both groups of students faced challenges in settling into study.

Relocating students: Campus-based students reflected on how they adjusted to study, having relocated from their home community:

Transitioning was harder than I thought. Culture shock from a small town... It was tough settling in at first, a shock to the system. I really love my family and being with my family, so the first months were hard, you have to do everything on your own. (University of Metropolis)

They also identified different types of university (or affiliated) organised activities that helped with their social and academic transition to university:

Four and a half hours drive here and the college was very welcoming. They really wanted you to settle in well... I really jumped into the social activities; the biggest obstacle was having friends. I did not have them in my country town and now I have friends here. I went to every party in 'O' week. (University of Hinterlands)

PASS – Peer Assisted Study Sessions – they are the best things ever. They are the only reason I passed chemistry and maths, one of the best things at uni. I have told the freshers go to PASS. PASS was promoted to me in class and you sign up on Moodle, also constant emails from my first year science adviser. My drive to do well was also helpful. (University of Hinterlands)

My mentor was really important. I did not meet my mentor at Orientation, as I did not fly down in time, however, we did talk on the phone/skype.... I was thinking of taking a break and getting centred in (city) to get my head around it. My mentor helped me and so it was fine. (University of Metropolis)

Online students: Online students also spoke of challenges of transitioning to online study when living in remote Australia:

It was pretty daunting at first to be honest, as I had never done any real study before. At school and TAFE, you did your assignments but I never had to go home and do intense study. I had never studied and there are things that I know now that I wished I had of known at the start I did not ask for help, there were things I know now that I should have asked. I did not want to seem stupid... (University of Hinterlands)

The relationship with the unit coordinator was not really clearly explained so I was fumbling around a bit to find out what they wanted. (University of Metropolis)

However, they largely referenced their lecturers and peers as support with academic and social transition:

I can call or email my lecturers at any time, they are supportive. (university) lecturers understand your life and they try and explain your queries by phone or through references, there are extensions if necessary. They have provided me with specific references in (town). (University of the Coast)

I talk every week to the lecturers so there is a link, a bit of a bond. The tutorials are awesome. We do have to talk and talk to the other students and we swap phone numbers and chat. Some of the guys that studied in (regional town) talk about how they contacted each other. Oh my god I would so love that, but I do not have time. (University of the Coast)

However, not all students felt comfortable reaching out to staff:

I have just been accepted into a (post graduate course) I did not want to ask dumb questions. (University of Hinterlands)

Online students also commented on the limited understanding by their university of their learning environment:

I have to set up the pracs and I get no support at all. I need to be in a town where there is accommodation. My family is in (state) and I go down there, but it is difficult dealing with another state.... There is no financial support for the prac. (Online student, University of the Coast)

We are on gravel roads and they need to understand that. (University of the Coast)

If I had my time again, I would be born in a metropolitan area. (University of Hinterlands)

Challenges with technology were also a reoccurring theme for students living in remote areas, studying online:

I made sure there never was an issue with technology. I would complete my assignments a week earlier... I just had to work around it as it was my problem not theirs. I remember trying to get help with an assignment in that first year and I was told that any assistance given to me would be an unfair advantage for the other students, so they could not help me so I have never gone back to the uni for assistance again. (Online student, University of the Coast)

It is now a bit harder studying online, a bit restrictive, just takes more time. (Online student who relocated to remote Australia during degree, University of Metropolis)

However, some students felt supported by their institution when facing Internet challenges:

Internet is pretty good; the power comes from (state) – four power outages more than two days long. (University) called me to give an extension during that time. They must know where you come from and I thought that was pretty good. (online student, University of the Coast)

Discussion

The profile of remote students shows the majority are either relocating younger full-time students or more mature students remaining in their community and studying

part-time and online. Both groups have high rates of multiple equity group membership that reflect geographic, financial, and socio-cultural factors of disadvantage. These factors which indicate students at risk, as Kahu and Nelson (2017) noted, are predictive but not causal. Indeed, qualitative data in the study reveal students who are resilient and resourceful, but they are the voices of those who have thrived. Student retention is a complex mix of interconnected push and pull factors. Rather than blaming students for being underprepared or unmotivated, the sector can build on past successes to improve retention of remote students.

This research sought to identify what more could to be done to support remote students' success, whilst acknowledging the extensive extant research into the student experience in Australia and internationally. The literature includes an important body of research that explores regional students' issues and challenges (Cardak et al., 2017; Devlin & McKay, 2017). These studies address the regional context and offer valuable insights, but the remote student experience is often buried, as indeed it is within generic studies of the student experience. As a way of condensing this vast body of research, we have chosen to focus on several acknowledged frameworks of the student experience as key reference points for their relevance to remote students, and to advance our argument that we need to attend to the particularity of students and avoid designing support strategies that are not fit for purpose.

Frameworks may address student engagement holistically, reviewing factors that impact on individuals (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2017), or focus on the first year experience (Kift, 2009, 2015), or on factors arising from equity group membership (Bennett et al., 2015; Zacharias, 2017), or even on mode of study as the unifying principle (see Stone, 2016 on principles for online learning). A framework to develop a 'maturity model' to deliver an integrated institutional strategy to improve student engagement, success, and retention was also reviewed (Nelson et al., 2014).

Bennett et al. (2015) developed the Equity Initiative Framework (EIF) in their study *Review of Evidence of Impact* which evaluated equity initiatives in Australian universities. They identified peer-reviewed research on successful equity programmes and collated common features. The results were presented as a typology based on the student life cycle; the EIF (Bennett et al., 2015) was designed as a guide that was adaptable to context. The value and relevance of the EIF to this discussion is that it arises from research on demonstrated effectiveness of initiatives to support access, participation, and retention of Australian equity groups, including regional and remote students. In interrogating the EIF for its applicability to remote students, Pollard (2018) found its value lay in the framework's mapping of comprehensive support throughout the student journey, including pathways into, and transitions from, study to employment.

Almost 10% of the remote student cohort identify as being Indigenous Australians. Indigenous students are included as one the six equity groups, but the EIF and other broad-based equity initiatives are insufficient to address the particular circumstances of Indigenous students. Their continuing under-representation in higher education is one impact of a history of dispossession faced by Indigenous Australians. Behrendt's review of Indigenous higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012) provided comprehensive recommendations for support of Indigenous students, that align with the

frameworks discussed here in their focus on supporting the whole student journey and adopting a whole-of-institution approach. Critical, however, is to acknowledge Indigenous culture and knowledge and embed it in the curriculum, so that students feel a sense of belonging in institutions that reflect their cultural values; these are themes that resonate with the frameworks discussed herein. Any strategy to support remote students requires awareness of Indigenous students' specific support needs as an integral component.

Attrition in Australian universities is highest in the first year (Department of Education, cited Kift, 2015) so, much effort has focused on transition and the first year experience (FYE). Kift's scholarship in elaborating six principles implemented as 'transition pedagogy' (2009) sought to embed transition support intentionally within the curriculum, as 'it is within the first year curriculum that students must be inspired, supported, and realise their sense of belonging'. This approach advanced the co-curricular model of offering support initiatives alongside academic programmes, which was likened to a first-generation approach (Kift & Nelson, 2005). An intentionally designed curriculum, a second-generation approach, encouraged collaboration between academics and professional support staff, but engaged students in the classroom to mediate the coherence and quality of students' learning experiences throughout their studies (Kift, 2015). Adopting an integrated approach, university-wide, to deliver contextualised and responsive support to all students, has been described as a third-generation approach (Clarke et al., 2011). These principles were also evident in Stone's (2016) national guidelines for best practice in supporting online learning.

Transition pedagogy has been influential in Australian and international contexts in the decade since its introduction (Kift, 2015; Nelson et al., 2012). The value of a whole-of-instruction approach to intentional curriculum design and the challenges of sustaining such an approach have been explored by researchers from three Queensland universities (Nelson et al., 2014). They proposed adapting the theory of maturity models, widely used in process improvement, to educational settings. Nelson et al. (2014) developed and trialled a maturity model to transform student engagement, success, and retention and their findings offer a solid framework for institutions looking to develop institutional solutions to improving student outcomes.

Research on whole-of-institution approaches has not progressed in isolation to research that focuses on the individual student and what determines whether they will engage with their studies. Kahu's (2013) critical review of the literature of student engagement identified four elements: behavioural (student behaviours, teaching practices); psychological (internal psycho-social processes); socio-cultural (broader social contexts); and holistic (drawing all elements together to support whole-of-student approaches). Kahu has proposed an integrative model of student engagement, to capture the complexity of the concept.

Kahu's framework, further refined by Kahu and Nelson in 2017, highlights the importance of affective, psychological, and behavioural attributes in determining whether a student will engage and transition successfully. For example, the importance of belonging is identified as a being one of four critical psychological mechanisms that facilitate student engagement and success. The other three outlined

in the conceptual framework of student engagement are academic self-efficacy, emotion, and well-being (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). The framework also explains how the negative past experiences of 'non-traditional' students can adversely impact their engagement and success, outlining the importance of activating the four key psychological mechanisms outlined above, in combination with the other elements of the framework. This holistic approach resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social, cultural, and human capital as elements that can entrench inequality for non-traditional students through lack of networks and knowledges that assist their more advantaged peers.

Each framework considered here addresses critical elements of students' experiences, but we assert that no single framework can address the complexity of the whole student journey. All offer valuable insights and contribute to theoretical understanding of the student experience and student engagement. These frameworks are valuable tools to guide institutional strategies but benefit from review against our understanding of student needs. We maintain that there is value in using the remote student cohort as a 'control group' to test the comprehensiveness of strategic plans for the student experience. Remote students' circumstances remind administrators of the importance of keeping the complexity of real-world experiences in mind when considering theoretical constructs. Would this strategy meet the needs of this cohort of students, with all its complexities?

In posing such a question, there is an assumption that universities have a sound understanding of who their students are. In practice, the case studies and previous research, such as Stone's (2016) research on support for online students, have shown that this knowledge is not widely shared across all universities, although the use of data analytics to inform retention strategies is gaining ground. The principle of 'know your students' in order to support them effectively was prioritised by Pollard (2018) in her research into effective support for remote students. It remains fundamental to the success of any support or teaching and learning strategy.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that remote students are not just a component of a larger regional student cohort but are a distinct group in themselves with specific characteristics and, as a consequence, need to be clearly recognised as such. The corollary is that institutional responses must be finely tuned to the needs of remote students if both are to be effective in supporting them.

Importantly, this is not about correcting a 'deficit discourse' for a disadvantaged equity group. Student evidence recounts examples of resilience and resourcefulness, but the journey to higher education should not be so fraught for those who succeed, nor should it discourage those who aspire to higher education goals. Education has the power to transform lives, and it is our collective responsibility to make sure all students are given equal opportunity to achieve higher education success, regardless of where they live.

In conclusion, this research has focused on how remote student success can be enhanced by universities, by adopting student-centred practices that place remote students directly in the frame of institutional strategies for learning and teaching and the student experience. The wealth of theoretical models discussed here, implemented to varying degrees in Australian universities, demonstrate that the knowledge to develop whole-of-student, whole-of-university strategy is already well advanced. By enhancing our knowledge of remote students and their challenges, we can learn how to improve student support and the quality of the student experience for all students.

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Chapter 17

The Politics of Ethics in Rural Social Research: A Cautionary Tale



Jo-Anne Reid

Abstract An ethical approach to rural research is one that recognises the effects of geography and location on the design, funding, implementation, and reporting of research. Human research that claims to address rural issues must be alert to the problems that generalised ethical frameworks produce for ethical practice in rural areas. As researchers, we cannot silence complexity or flatten out differences between places and the people who live in them; therefore, we must seek to acknowledge the qualitatively different social spaces that are broadly classified as ‘rural’. Drawing on examples from two large-scale educational research studies, this chapter highlights the range of ethical considerations that impact on the design and implementation of research in sites that are marginalised from metro-normative assumptions about research practice. In this way, it argues that institutional frameworks are currently ill-equipped to deal with the specificities of place and space.

Introduction: Understanding Rural Differences

There has been national concern for well over a century about the ongoing failure of research, policy, and practice to effectively deal with rural educational disadvantage. In spite of concerted efforts from national, state, and territory governments over this time, the provision of high-quality schooling for children in many rural communities remains inconsistent and unreliable (Mills & Gale, 2010; Reid, 2017; Roberts & Green, 2013; Vinson et al., 2015). This provides an increasingly urgent moral challenge to the nation as a whole. Emphasising the need for a national focus to ‘enhance’ educational opportunities, access, and outcomes in regional and rural Australia, Halsey (2018, p. 5) highlighted the intransigence of ‘the rural problem’ in and for Australian education. For too long, policy efforts to address this problem have called for evidence accrued through what a ‘rural standpoint’ (Roberts, 2014) exposes as dominant metrocentric approaches to educational research. Although such approaches can offer general information about the sector, they are unable to deal

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with the issue of rural difference, or with the fact that there may not *ever* be a solution that can be generally applied to *all* rural schools. As I have argued elsewhere (Reid et al., 2010), this is because research, and the implementation of policy based on research in any rural location too often ignores the socio-political complexity of rural contexts.

Ethical practice in rural research and in policy implementation requires a theoretical lens that attends to the differences in the nature of rural social spaces across the nation and acknowledges how interrelated historical complexities and affordances of particular geographies, demographies, and economies are realised and manifested in different rural places. The effects of these mean that research or policy that silences complexity and flattens out difference has little chance of achieving its aims (Reid, 2017). Researching in ways that foreground, and work with, rural differences, recognising the shifting and indeterminate nature of the ‘rural’ as a category, requires a particular ethical consciousness—one that is attuned to, and aligned with, an explicitly rural standpoint (Downes & Roberts, 2015).

In this chapter, I explore three aspects of the nature of such a rural research ethics—an ethics that recognises the effects of geography and location on the design, funding, implementation, and reporting of research. My focus is on the politics of academic research practice and the relationships with the rural places and people that are positioned as the objects of research. I draw on examples from two large-scale educational research studies I have been involved in, both of which involved a range of rural communities and different formations of rural social space.¹ The *TERRAnova* study aimed to inform teacher education policy and practice by increasing understanding of how some rural schools successfully meet the challenge of school staffing and teacher retention through in-depth case studies of success (see Chapter 3 for more details). The *Indigenous Child Care Choices* [ICCC] project was designed to inform the NSW government on the childcare arrangements and experiences of Indigenous families. It commissioned the study in preparation for its policy response to the national early years education initiative, with a view to enhancing the transition to school of children who experience multiple and changeable care arrangements prior to school. ICCC was a longitudinal study of over 107 Aboriginal families with young children, with research sites in rural, remote, regional, and metropolitan areas. While the examples I discuss here are necessarily situated in the rural, the ICCC study highlighted the general lack of attention to the ethics of research with marginalised communities. I suggest that the arguments here are equally applicable to marginalised communities more generally, including those situated in particular ‘places’ and ‘spaces’ in the city.

In what follows, I tease out three key ethical issues that both implicitly and explicitly governed and impacted on our research practice in those studies. First, qualitative research is *always* situated, and even if not explicitly acknowledged, it is conducted

¹These are, first, the *TERRAnova* study, *Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia* (Reid et al., 2015), and second the *Indigenous Child Care Choices* project (Bowes et al., 2011). These are referred to here as *TERRAnova* and *ICCC*, respectively.

in particular places, the situated social spaces which produce particular social meanings and possibilities. Second, rural research in Australia is often, or at least to a significant degree, directly or indirectly about Aboriginal people. Third, research in rural and remote locations often takes longer and costs more. Each of these has profound implications, both methodologically and practically, as well as politically. As I argue here, these issues almost always intersect and produce forms of practice that run the risk of research being driven by expediency and economic rationality, rather than research quality. My aim in reflecting on the two studies here is to highlight the particular ethical politics that rural researchers face in their practice—and the value for researchers more generally to consider the academic implications of ethical practice from a situated standpoint.

Rural Research Is About Place(s)

Researching in (or about) ‘the rural’ foregrounds issues of place. Simply identifying a potential study as ‘rural research’ differentiates it from general or mainstream research, the metrocentricity of which is unmarked. (In the same way, research that is identified as ‘urban’ in focus similarly highlights its particular meaning as specifically focussed.) But all research (even large-scale survey research) takes place *some-where*, and by foregrounding the importance of place and ‘placing’ rural research, rural researchers are raising important ethical issues often overlooked in the mainstream. By taking a ‘rural standpoint’ that emphasises place, as Roberts (2014) argues, researchers can move beyond using ‘the rural’ as merely a category, a research variable, or a convenience sample. Drawing on Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), he highlights the profoundly ethical argument that: “If the research is not advancing an understanding *of* the rural, *for* the rural, it may be just enacting symbolic violence” (emphasis in the original, Roberts, 2014, p. 135). It is through the work of coming to understand rural places that the intersection of research ethics with the politics, funding, and conditions of education research practice becomes visible. This work is significant, and there are costs in terms of time, funding, physical and emotional labour associated with visiting, and getting to know rural communities for research purposes. Because these are significant, ‘costing them in’ to research is important, if only to ensure that research practice is ethical and that generalisations across the rural are not made in ignorance of important contextual differences as I have highlighted above. To explain the ethics of place, I reflect on two issues here: the work involved in site visits and the ethics of preserving participant anonymity when attempting to value the specificities of place.

Site Studies

Categorisation of ‘rural’ places in terms of their geographic and political location is undeniably general. In Australia, ‘regional’, ‘rural’, or ‘remote’ difference is typically identified geo-politically, by state (as in ‘rural NSW’ or ‘remote Northern Territory’). These categories connect to the *Australian Statistical Geography Standard* (ASGS) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and the *Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia* (ARIA), which works with the geographical dimensions of size, location, and distance as central means of understanding rurality. But as argued elsewhere (Chapter 3; Reid et al., 2010), the lived experience of people in rural places located in the same ‘location’ or ‘ARIA belt’—even the same Local Government Area (LGA)—can be very different according to the elements that interact to produce the social space of each. The building of a highway to make road transport between regional cities more efficient, for instance, can have major effects on a smaller townsite by-passed along the route, with severe impact on its economy. As businesses are ‘dis-placed’ on the traditional highway route, household incomes decline, and properties are devalued. Understanding the meaning of the physical location of rural places in relation to regional cities, railways, roads, water sources, and the quality of other social amenities is important for any initial understanding of any site.

In the *TERRAnova* study, we eventually included a map in every school Case Study (Reid et al., 2012b) to indicate what we saw as important ‘geographical’ features of the rural social space of the community, such as the area covered by the school bus run, for instance. We also worked methodologically to attempt to capture an *affective* sense of place as we entered each community as a research site. As noted in the Report, we wanted to understand the place from the standpoint of “every new teacher, police officer, rural nurse, doctor, or banker who had ever entered the town for the first time” (Reid et al., 2012a, p. 58). We included some of these impressions of place in the Case Study reports to capture the ways in which the look and ‘feel’ of a place produce an *affective* response in a newcomer:

Driving around town – wealth evident in the houses on this side of the highway, Federation style bungalows and large family houses (‘Einfamilienhausen’ comes to mind, unbidden, from where? Perhaps because I drove along Deutscher Street this morning, close to the school, and winner of the ‘Temora Best Street’ competition in 2000, as the sign says!). These houses are on the hill, like the high school, looking down to the town and out to the flat land all around. (Field notes, Temora Site Visit) (Reid et al., 2012b, p. 48)

What became immediately significant for us, as researchers, was that collecting this ‘data’ about place produced an ethical problem. Mapping a place identifies it. Responding to it affectively constructs it in ways that a reflexive sociology must acknowledge (Bourdieu, 1992). It was not surprising that the conditions of the research ethics approval we had been given by our universities, and the different state education departments we were working with, emphatically required that individual participants, teachers, and community members were not to be identified. But accounting for the particularities of the rural places we studied makes this difficult:

Techniques of obscuring identities are commonly employed in qualitative accounts but rarely discussed in texts on methodology or representation; their methodological, political, and theoretical implications go largely unexamined. (Nespor, 2000, p. 546)

Moreover, we quickly found that there were significant differences across the twenty locations where these successful schools were located. All the schools were 'successful' at retaining teachers, but (unlike Tolstoy's view of happy families) they were successful in their own ways. Although our subsequent analysis showed that there were several things in common across the range of sites (Lock et al., 2009; Reid et al., 2012b; White et al., 2011; White & Reid, 2008), each of the communities we studied operated *differently*—the rural social space that these places had produced was not 'the same'. Our theoretical interest lay in its difference, and hence the need for teachers to understand the specific histories and affordances produced by the particular (entangled) geography, demography, and economy of each of them.

If we were to produce Case Studies of the schools that had been nominated by their communities as having successfully retained good teaching staff, then we needed to describe these communities, and the different forms of rural social space that contextualised each school. As argued elsewhere, social space is 'practised place' (Reid et al., 2010), and practice is produced in and through the language, action and relationships that exist there. These are material issues that create what Thompson (2002) calls 'thisness' in relation to place, and which are directly associated with the very thing we were trying to find out: how *this* school, in *this* community managed to successfully retain its teachers. But as Nespor argues:

Even pseudonyms, the most common anonymizing tools, are usually considered only as devices for protecting participants, not as strategic tools that play important roles in constituting objects of inquiry. (Nespor, 2000, p. 546)

We found that the German settler history of Temora, for instance, appeared to have significance in relation to the ongoing success of the school. Pseudonyms disguising this would make nonsense of our analysis. As our literature review had indicated, and as our analysis of the site-study data progressed, the implications of erasing such specificities of place from our research reports were intellectually problematic and would have made a material difference to the value of the knowledge that was produced. And while no individual teachers were identified in our research reports, their positions, roles, and histories relevant to the meaning we were constructing, were. This meant that particular individuals would be identifiable to people within each social space: their contributions, although de-identified, could not be 'anonymised', because they were all intrinsically part of the place that we were researching. In this way, although our institutional and jurisdictional ethics committees' conditions were formally met, the limitations of such institutionalised understanding were exposed.

Research that Values Place Does not ‘Anonymise’ It

Following the work of Nespor (2000), we argued in *TERRAnova* that anonymisation of place in qualitative research ‘washes’ out the specificities of geography, environment, history, and social relations that produce the particular form of rural social space constituting the actual object of our inquiry.

As we noted in Volume 1 of the Report, place is intrinsically connected to:

[t]eachers’ vernacular ways of knowing – the ‘war stories’ they tell of the difficult schools they have worked at – where schools are characterised by ‘remoteness’ and ‘disadvantage’ as markers of ‘doing it hard’. Mining towns are ‘harder’ than farming communities to teach in (so that the name ‘Paraburdoo’ may signify harder teaching than ‘Manjimup’ in WA); prosperous viticultural communities are more desirable and ‘easier’ than drought-blighted locations (‘Mudgee’ may be preferable to ‘Collarenebri’ in NSW); and schools with high Indigenous populations are more difficult than those without (teaching in ‘Goondiwindi’ may be harder than in ‘Allora’, in Queensland, for instance) at particular times. (Reid et al., 2012a, p. 185)

In the large-scale *Rural Teacher Education Project* [R(T)EP] that preceded *TERRAnova* for instance, there had been delicate political negotiations around protocols for naming schools for which the NSWDET is responsible. These occupied a great deal of researcher energy, and the ‘ethical’ refusal to explicitly acknowledge differences between places was ultimately felt to have compromised the development of theoretical understandings about place in the study (Green, 2008). Names of places that ‘mean something’ to teachers in this regard are part of the mythology of the profession, and the tarnished reputations some places have developed undoubtedly add to the difficulties that state departments have in changing public perceptions of particular places, and overcoming prejudicial attitudes against them (Bourdieu, 1999). Hence in the *TERRAnova* study, begun some years after *R(T)EP*, we sought to tackle the issue of naming as one of methodology as well as ethics.

Methodologically, we planned to allow final approval for the Case Studies we produced to rest with each school community—who would make the decision about public naming of their place on the basis of full understanding of what had been prepared for publication. Until this approval was received, and before the final Case Studies had been approved by the (then) NSWDEC, before returning to schools, we needed to use pseudonyms in reporting our research progress. In the end, even though every school community agreed to allow publication of the set of Case Studies that fully identified their schools (Reid et al., 2012b), we did not gain approval from NSW to name the Case Study schools in the analytic Report itself (Reid et al., 2012a).

This meant that we needed to *anonymise* these places when discussing the material and social specificities that comprise each of them as particular forms of rural social space. The effects of this can be seen in Table 17.1—an extract from a table that demonstrates the initial analysis of characteristics of place, which was developed to assist our theorising after the first six Case Studies were completed. In the absence of departmental approval to name the places we studied, the value of the Report to government was compromised. Few policy decisions can be made on the basis of

Table 17.1 ‘De-Identified Research Sites’ Extract from *TERRAova* Project Report Vol 1 (Reid et al. 2012a, p. 186)

Case Study	Economy, Industry	Geography: Place, Land, Environment, Sustainability	Demography: People, Culture, Indiginity	Nurturing Approaches to Newly Qualified Teachers in the RSS Produced Here
1. Apple Student population: 40	Dairy, cattle, viticulture	Volcanic plains, inland lake	Farming community. No significant indigenous community	Values expertise of each other Positioned as expert Supportive Respectful
2. Two Mile Student population: 240	Farming, mining, motels and truck stops, transport crossroads	Flat, plains, dry, no river	Small Indigenous community of relocated individuals largely integrated into local families—this land is not a traditional meeting place because there is no river	Care of staff, family atmosphere, ‘can do’ attitude, sport and Church are major means of connection and community building

evidence that cannot be readily accepted as true—and anonymising place in this way reduces its face-validity considerably.

While the *TERRAnova* Case Studies are fully identified in Volume 2 of the Report (Reid et al., 2012b), their analysis in Volume 1 (Reid et al., 2012a) makes it difficult to ‘recognise’ and form strong conclusions from what they can tell us. Further, because the study was conducted in the interests of social justice, and “with the explicit intent of stimulating, informing or otherwise supporting social transformations that are meant to redress basic socio-educational inequalities and alleviate oppressive conditions” (Ladwig, 1994, p. 77), its impact as what Ladwig called ‘socially recognisable evidence’ has been similarly compromised. Nesper suggests that:

If one knows exactly where and what its setting was, for example, one could ask if the processes described in the [setting] studied would play out in the same way in a suburb with a different political economy, with students of different ethnicities, at some other period in history, at a larger or smaller school, at a school with a different curriculum, and so on. (Nesper, 2000, p. 552)

As noted elsewhere:

The taken-for-granted ethics of anonymisation in qualitative research, and the almost *de rigueur* ‘disclaimer’ about generalisability that must therefore accompany any representation of ‘someplace’, reflect the metronormativity of educational research, and fail to acknowledge that the material and affective dimensions of place cannot be factored out of any understanding of it. (Green & Reid, 2014, p. 35)

In subsequent work conducted as an outside observer relying on documentation in the public domain, rather than ethically approved interview and ethnography (Reid, 2017), I have tried to foreground the politics of naming and its effects on rural places and people, taking another inland NSW town, Walgett, as an example.

In the ICCC study, the politics around naming was equally problematic. Both our institutional policies *and* the NSW Early Childhood Industry ethical protocols refused permission to identify the location of any of the three metropolitan, five rural, and four remote Aboriginal communities who agreed to participate in our study. Even though our methodology explicitly recognised the plurality of Aboriginal society and refused to essentialise the idea of either ‘Indigenous families’ or ‘Aboriginal communities’, we consider that these constraints also constrain the value of the resulting Report: i.e. the knowledge that can be gained from research suffers from these ethical restrictions. The ethics protocols do essentialise, and homogenise, across place and space and this process ensured that the research Report could only generalise our findings about what ‘Aboriginal families’ want from childcare across vast geographical areas. Ethical protocols without a rural standpoint ultimately ignore the fact that places *are* different, and the people in them have different needs.

As Nespor (2000) observes in relation to his point above:

[a]nother reason there are relatively few identifications of anonymised qualitative studies may be that researchers and other readers prefer to have these pseudogeneral accounts; we do not want to deal with the spatial and temporal situatedness of the events and processes described. (p. 561)

Yet at the same time, in the ICCC study, our research design and practice highlighted the contradictions of such ‘metrocentric’ ethical restrictions. As part of an ethic of reciprocity, for instance, the Project team ‘gave back’ to each one of the Aboriginal communities we worked with, a beautifully-rendered presentation copy of the photographs and comments that community members had provided to us as ‘data’ showing how childcare operated for them. It is paradoxical that, in line with the same ethical responsibility that constrained our acknowledgement of the places we had gathered information from, the artwork used on the cover of these printed books and the final Report (Bowes et al., 2011) needed to clearly acknowledge and therefore identify the participant who produced the work. It was a painting she used to show us how her community understands childcare and her hometown, and it exemplifies the dilemma that rural researchers face.

Although we followed correct ethical procedure in ICCC, ensuring all people and places were referred to in general, non-specific ways, so that only a full and detailed reading of the Report would suggest that this painting was actually part of the data gathered in the study, the requirement to acknowledge the artist and her community can also be interpreted as counteracting the base ethical contractual agreement against identification. Our dilemma is framed as a question of ambiguity, here, and characterises the difficulties we experienced as we worked to replace material evidence (i.e. of the language, actions, and relationships we observed and were told about) with suggestion, gesture, hint, and circumlocution. In our efforts to ‘ethically’ disguise the reality of place, our rigorous research practice ultimately produced ‘fictions’, in effect. I will come back to the issue of the additional labour that this meant for the researchers later, as this is something seldom addressed in research reporting, or in methodology manuals, and was not identified as an issue at the time of the project—even though it meant that costs of researcher time were expanded, and the

production time for the Report needed to be considerably extended, causing policy delay and shortcomings.

It is clear that attention to real places in research is complex and difficult. It is harder. It takes longer. It requires perhaps more overtly rigorous member-checking and confirmation of researcher interpretation—not as fact, but as a recognisably legitimate interpretation of the information provided. As I discuss below, this has effects in terms of the time and costs associated with rural research practice. But first, mention needs to be made of the final issue related to the ethics of deidentification: the use of visual data, such as photographs and maps.

Using Images

Visual images are an important part of the information and data-gathering that supports research analysis foregrounding differences in terms of space and place. What is immediately significant when collecting data through photographing places is that questions of anonymity become moot. I have already noted the importance of mapping for the meaning of the site studies in *TERRAnova*. We also found that photographs were important to record geographical features and the impact of industry and economic development on the landscape and streetscape of our research sites—aspects that attracted our attention as meaningful in relation to a site as rural social space. These images were markers of location, of history, and of relationships in place. In Temora, for instance, the image of a road sign in the main street, drawing attention to the next towns along the highway, was immediately significant to me as a newcomer entering the site. It created a range of simultaneous meanings and effects. First, of course, it signified that Temora was a town that many people simply pass through, on the way to somewhere else. But it also illustrated the town as both distinct and distant from these other places. It could also be read simultaneously from an in-dweller's perspective as situating Temora at the *centre* of these other towns, thereby highlighting the spatial and economic relationships of this place with its surroundings.

In *TERRAnova*, our attention to representations of spatiality was supported by our growing theoretical understanding of the importance of cartography (Green & Reid, 2014). This led to our decision to prepare maps for inclusion in each of the Site Study Reports in a way that would both represent location and decentre the metronormativity of educational thinking (Reid et al., 2012b). A map that places Temora at its centre, with no reference to Sydney, for example, asks its reader to read it differently—from a rural standpoint, perhaps. Further, as I discuss in the next section, the readings that dominant, metrocentric cartographies often produce can effectively silence particular rural meanings that impact significantly on the lived experience of the people who reside there—those whom policies are designed to govern, as well as to serve. The scale of many metropolitan-focused maps of NSW, for instance, means that many small communities are not even 'on the map' at all.

The ICCC study was focused primarily on producing knowledge about Indigenous Child Care Choices across a range of sites. For this reason, the ‘rural’ and ‘remote’ communities who agreed to participate in the ethnographic inquiry were positioned as two different ‘research variables’ or ‘samples’ that the funding partner needed to better understand. But seeing them in this way, as variations on a metronormative understanding rather than as a means of producing knowledge from a rural standpoint, meant that information about the substantive issue of what forms of childcare were ‘chosen’ by Indigenous families was not particularly useful to guide future provision. Our methodology saw them differently. As a funding body, the NSWDOCS was open to this argument, and although aware of the limitations we highlighted, was unable to respond to the ethical implications around the specificity of place discussed above. Our methodological attention to the place-based, situated *reasons* for these choices—from a rural standpoint—allowed us to see that in some places there were actually no choices at all. Not identifying these places does not seem ethical in a wider social sense.

In ICCC, the data that allowed us access to childcare practices in remote and rural communities included a large number of photographs of Aboriginal children that were collected by participants in each community. Families had been given cameras and asked to record images of their favoured forms of childcare. Although permission to publish photographs of the children in the study was sought and gained from all participants in accordance with formal ethics process, this permission could only be requested on the basis that the people in the images would remain anonymous. Yet as I noted above, the photographs from each site were all collated, reproduced and published as a book. These were returned to each community, in accordance with the ethical protocols, as a means of ‘giving back’ to the families who had participated.

These were not published beyond each community and not appended to the final Report to NSWDOCS as funding body. So, the Report contained photographic images that could not be identified and situated in place—and in fact served more as an artistic design feature, adding interest to the project report rather than illustrating or extending the textual meaning and our research findings. Because of our ‘ethical’ silence about place in the research report, the value of the rich representations of difference among the rural social spaces we studied was diminished. From an ethics of social justice, this can be seen to have limited the value and integrity of the study overall, particularly in terms of the cultural and social diversity that positions Aboriginal people differently in different forms of rural social space. This is often difficult knowledge to deal with in a research context, but the ethical responsibility not to ignore it is imperative. It highlights how crucially important it is for educational researchers to take up a rural standpoint as an ethical responsibility. From a rural standpoint, we have to acknowledge (and deal with the implications of) the fact that, in Australia, all rural educational research interventions must take account of the politics of Aboriginal research within them.

Rural Research Is Often Directly or Indirectly About Aboriginal People

As noted in the earlier account of rural social space (see Chapter 3), it is essential for rural researchers to engage with Indigenous culture, histories, and demography. Importantly, this implies an ethical responsibility to take account of the differences and specificities of these when planning and conducting research in rural locations. Official ethical protocols and guidelines for the conduct of research with Indigenous people (AIATSIS, 2012) aim to ensure the promotion of ‘meaningful engagement and reciprocity between researchers and Indigenous people’, no matter where they are located.

But failure to observe this ethical responsibility often happens ‘in passing’, as it were, when we treat the rural as a research variable, or a research setting, rather than taking up a rural standpoint to inform all our research design. It happens when we fail to consider our own positioning as researchers, outsiders, and fail to reflect critically on data that, as Bourdieu (1992) warns, seems to ‘give itself’ to us, as truth. A rural standpoint extends our ethical responsibility into practices of data analysis, not just data collection. As raced, gendered, and classed subjects ourselves, we need to make sure that the ‘natural’ interpretations we make about the meanings of data do not blind us to the possibility of ‘other’ standpoints. The effects of programmatic policy practice in rural settings might not seem questionable, or even remarkable, from a metrocentric or euro-centric point of view. But these are often seen differently from a rural or Indigenous standpoint. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith says:

From an indigenous perspective Western research is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, difference and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialised forms of language, and structures of power. (Smith, 1999, p. 42)

What this means is that, without careful attention to the *meanings* of Indigenous subjectivities and standpoints in rural social space, educational researchers can be blind to the significance of what they are seeing. We can start to understand this by highlighting Bourdieu’s guiding principle of researcher reflexivity as ethical practice. And while critical reflection on data from an Indigenous standpoint is difficult for non-Indigenous researchers, being alert to the dangers of simply accepting the data that our informants (or our constructed representations of rural ‘reality’) provide is not. Such a consciousness of standpoint, of course, supports research in all other contexts, where dominant meanings and political correctness can too often prevail to overlook the effects of practices in terms of cultural difference.

The ICCC project (Bowes et al., 2011), for example, aimed to provide data about early intervention in the developmental and educational pathways of Indigenous children, and about the early years’ experiences valued by Indigenous families. DOCS had commissioned a study using conventional research methods in its prior, parent project (*Child Care Choices*—Bowes et al., 2004). Here, the views of the general NSW population catered for by the early childhood sector were studied through the

use of surveys, phone interviews, and child assessments. Even though they were quite sufficient in metropolitan areas which may have included Aboriginal residents, not one of these approaches would be suitable or appropriate for a study of Indigenous families in rural communities.

If we had used the same survey methodology from the parent study, issues of access, distance, and cultural attitudes would have meant that many rural Aboriginal parents were excluded from participation, highlighting the ethical importance of a rural standpoint in research design. The ICCC methodology, developed from the outset with Aboriginal co-researchers, sought to use a respectful, relational process of *yarning* (Hayes et al., 2009) in a number of different communities, and to employ local Aboriginal research assistants in each site to first gather, and then help analyse the data. But as I have noted above, respectful processes for gaining access to Indigenous research participants and other marginalised communities is often overlooked in the research methods literature or is itself over-generalised. Our Aboriginal co-researcher, Laurie Crawford, prepared an initial set of entry protocols for the study to ensure that potential participants would have trust in the approaches we were taking. But as Humphery (2002) reminds us:

in their focus on the interactions between mostly non-Indigenous researchers and the Indigenous researched, ethical protocols are inclined to oversimplify the nature of power relationships, representing the community as a socially cohesive group of Indigenous people and homogenising intracommunity power relations and interests. (p. 44)

Our efforts to ensure that the Aboriginal communities we studied were not essentialised as ‘communities’ (Corbett, 2014) meant that we took pains to ensure that the voices of families who had perhaps been relocated away from their own country—and were thus not represented by local community elders—could be included, along with those who retained a traditional distrust of DOCS for any of a range of reasons. Their voices needed to be heard alongside those of families more powerful in ‘the community’ or more used to accessing services.

Our desire to work ethically in each location meant that we took pains to work *with* the people there, ultimately ensuring that we gave as well as took knowledge and information. We did this differently in each place (for instance, while we made picture books in all communities, some asked us to do other things, such as conduct a scrap-booking class, or run wider community events)—and this taught us much about the unpredictability of working ethically in rural areas. Over thirty Aboriginal families in remote NSW places and over forty in regional towns were finally recruited for the study, providing valuable information that to some extent informed the design and implementation of the state’s early years initiative, one of the aims of the national *Closing the Gap* policy. But the constraints and expectations of the mainstream academic research protocols I have discussed above did limit the effectiveness of what could be learnt about how different the response to policy needed to be in different places. They certainly highlighted the need for rethinking both funding and ethical regulations expressly from a rural standpoint, as well as need for research funding to acknowledge the costs of resourcing the additional time, academic labour and other costs that this implies for rural research.

Research Often Takes Longer in Rural and Remote Locations and Costs More

In the first year of the *TERRAnova* study, for instance, when we had completed the process of selecting Case Study sites and confirmed the willingness of selected schools and communities to participate in the study, we submitted ethics applications to local CEOs and research directorates of six state Education Departments: NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia. In five of these states, permission to begin was immediately forthcoming. The project was particularly opportune at this time, as inland Australia was moving into its second decade of drought in some areas, and newspapers around the nation were announcing funding for a range of local infrastructure projects, to “breathe new life into regional cities and country towns” (*The Age* 18 November 2008). This initiative was designed to convince people to remain in their rural locations by ensuring federal government funding for approved projects that would improve social and community health in rural communities. A study of communities where the school had been identified as particularly successful in retaining good teachers was welcomed. But in NSW, newspapers were also reporting that state-school teachers in the large state education system had begun a series of strike actions on a number of grounds (*Sydney Morning Herald* 19 November 2008). One of these was that the system of ‘transfer points’ formerly accruing to appointments in ‘hard to staff’ rural schools would no longer be prioritised in staffing policy.

With political pressure obviously an issue in NSW, we were advised by the NSW Education Department that research into the sustainability of rural education was ‘not in the interests of public education at this time’, and were refused permission to talk to teachers working in the rural schools we had identified. This directive produced a significant problem for the management and timely completion of the NSW Case Study visits. Schools where principals had been expecting a site-visit were contacted and indicated they were happy for us to be back in touch when approval was granted. Progress in the other states and in the other aspects of the research plan was unimpeded, but it took another full year for the NSW DET to allow access to the nominated sites, and give us permission to study what was happening in schools that were working successfully to attract and retain their staff.

Time, and the associated costs, was also a factor for the ICCC project (Bowes et al., 2011). As noted above, this had been funded by the NSW Department of Community Services, which was seeking to improve early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision across the whole state and needed an understanding of what was happening for Aboriginal children, to supplement the findings of the earlier *Child Care Choices* project (Bowes et al., 2004). Accepting our argument for the methodological differences that we considered were important for building trust when working with Aboriginal participants, the new study, though much smaller in scope than the original two-year study, was funded by the Department for four years. It took seven years to complete.

As I have outlined, our research method took account of the history of successive social policy failure in rural and remote Aboriginal communities and attempted to make sure that the ‘right voices’ were asked about what would work for them, in the places where they lived. DOCS was aware that it would be inappropriate for them to introduce blanket approaches that, while efficient from a metronormative perspective, had too-often proved exclusionary and discriminatory for the Indigenous population in the past. If we were to be able to obtain useful information, we needed to ensure that what people talked about reflected their needs and that they could articulate these needs rather than hiding realities that might compromise the freedom, safety, or income of family members. Our need for the people who would be ‘yarning’ with participants about their childcare practices to be trusted not to use the information against them, resulted in the decision, described above, to identify and employ Indigenous research assistants in each community. But the process of identifying, training, and resourcing local research assistants in each community was not straightforward, and, the local knowledge that they possessed revealed far more complexity than we had predicted. We came to appreciate the importance of Humphery’s words, above, demonstrating the futility of processes that do not attend to the histories and politics of local places.

From an ethical perspective, they highlight the problems with unreflective concepts of ‘community’, which in our context lead to a failure to consider the ways in which settler histories have overwritten Indigenous knowledges and the legacies of underlying social relationships that remain powerful. As researchers, we must always be aware that the codes of practice designed to protect Indigenous people from exploitation, and to safeguard their intellectual and cultural property, often “tend to encourage ‘the procedural observance of rules’ rather than fostering a more ‘dynamic’ reconceptualisation of research practice” (Humphery, 2002, p. 19). While ethical protocols acknowledge the effects of unequal power in any research, they are inclined to oversimplify the nature of power relationships, and too often (mis)represent ‘the community’ as a socially cohesive group. Whether this relates to the homogenisation of intra-community power relations and interests among Indigenous people, or between them and non-Indigenous people in any (rural) social space, this is always extremely problematic (Corbett, 2014):

Researchers have to be careful to not only listen to a few Aboriginal people with strong voices... The outcome can be that people don’t own the research or its results. ... Yarning for outcomes has to be carefully done and involve those who are not always the strong voices. (Burchill 2004, p. 9)

Gaining consent from one group in a community, or employing a research assistant from another, meant constant negotiation and renegotiation to gain access to participants, their homes, and social groupings (Reid et al., 2005). Of course, very often, the places on which our attention was focused were located at some distance from metropolitan research centres, and even from our own ‘regional’ working locations, producing materially significant difficulties across time zones, climate patterns, and local events. We were prepared for the need to seek community assistance many times, because of the number of different research sites, and we were able to draw on

the research literature to learn from other researchers in these or similar areas. But it soon became clear that, while other people's experience was a help, our research was not situated in their communities. Nobody had actually been along *this* particular path, in *this* place, at *this* time, before. We were 'always starting over' with each community (Reid et al., 2005), each participant, each and every time. Sometimes, we found that we needed to step back from a particular community for a time, respecting the strictures following a death in community, for instance, and start again later to ensure that we were actually working *with* community members rather than simply 'on' them.

Conclusion

An ethical attention to the specificity of place, and the acknowledgement of rural social space as a temporal and relational construct, means that, as researchers, we must always be aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, and of how relations of power are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life (Soja, 1989, p. 6). My focus in this chapter has been on the ethics of studying education practices in rural and remote locations in ways that are rigorous enough to usefully inform suitable and sustainable policy beyond the metropolis. But Green (2015) has reminded us of the dangers for rural sustainability of educational research, policy, and practice that concentrates on 'rural education' alone.

Thinking about 'rural education' policy separately from 'Indigenous education' policy makes no sense (Reid, 2017). But in terms of social ethics, neither should rural education be separated from rural health, housing or transport²—and as the increasingly urgent ethical imperative for the nation to recognise and deal with the impact of climate change on rural places, these policy areas should also be closely intertwined with 'environmental' education, policy, and research (McPherson et al., 2017). These things are closely connected and cannot ethically be separated. As Green (2015) argues, this is beginning to change: "Work is increasingly addressed to the changing constitution and complex interplay of rural industries, rural populations and rural environments in new eco-social conditions, in Australia and beyond" (p. 43).

All human geographies are filled with politics and ideology. This is particularly the case in rural areas in relation to the lived effects of historical interrelationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The legacies of what has been done in these environments, and the effects of what we now recognise as colonialist, racist, sexist, and classist policies and practices, still reside in every community and school. Rural education research must account for them if it is to fulfil its ethical responsibilities—and in so doing, it is uniquely placed to inform educational research

²The *TERRAnova* case study of Lightning Ridge (Reid et al., 2012a), for instance, describes how a principal with a clear understanding of the effects of long-distance driving on the vehicles of beginning teachers, had used literacy funding to purchase a school car that could be used to transport staff to professional development activities.

more generally about the importance of attention to place, space, and difference in research design and practice.

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Chapter 18

Valuing the Rural: Using an Ethical Lens to Explore the Impact of Defining, Doing and Disseminating Rural Education Research



Natalie Downes, Jillian Marsh, Philip Roberts, Jo-Anne Reid, Melyssa Fuqua, and John Guenther

Abstract In this chapter, we draw on the example of rural education research in Australia to highlight how place-consciousness in research is an ethical concern. In discussing this issue as an ethical concern, we are referencing the broader ethical responsibility around valuing people, places, communities, lived experiences, and the implications for research that foregrounds such a broader stance, rather than the matters normally raised in institutional ‘ethics approval’ processes that seek to safeguard participants from direct harm. To this end, we argue that the consideration or omission of the particularities of rural places has the potential to either benefit or harm people, places, and their communities in lasting ways. The insights in this chapter were developed from several examples of research projects undertaken by the various authors. These examples include comparisons of works undertaken from both a rural standpoint and metropolitan informed perspectives, and the differing outcomes of each approach. The discussion in this chapter is structured around four main topics: what it means to add the term ‘rural’ to research; the way that research methodology

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can either benefit or harm rural communities; cultural considerations in rural education research, with a particular focus on Indigenous Standpoint theory; and the implications of how we disseminate rural research. Importantly, this chapter highlights how approaching research from a rural standpoint, rather than dominant placeless metropolitan approaches, allows us to not only identify the underlying dominant discourses around rural disadvantage, but also why failure to recognise them leads to the production and reproduction of disadvantage for all those marginalised by metro-normative assumptions.

Introduction

Research happens—it takes place—*somewhere*. Research is always situated in particular places. If there are people living in those places, each place is enacted as a particular ‘social space’—that is, the ensemble of the meanings, knowledges and relationships that those particular people and their forebearers have generated there over time (Reid et al., 2010). Moreover, because education research, wherever it happens, *always* involves people, it cannot ignore the way that social spaces influence the knowledge it produces: it ‘takes place’, even if it does not know it.

In this chapter, we argue that the situated nature of education research is often overlooked, and that there is much to be learned by attending to rural education research as a means of clarifying the necessity for place-consciousness as a marker of research quality more generally. We use Australian rural educational research here as an ‘exemplary case’ because it enables us to explore what it means to put people, places, and communities first, rather than taking the placeless perspective that, as many chapters in this volume have asserted, is based on a metropolitan norm. We argue that consideration of the particularity of rural places is an ethical concern for research, and further, that because the lens of rural social space highlights the place and history of Indigenous people across all Australian places, rural research must also attend to the call from Indigenous researchers to see this metrocentricity as one of the long-lasting strategies of colonialism in this country. Our focus is on the potential of research to either benefit or harm people, places, and their communities in lasting ways.

In valuing the rural and using an ethical lens to do this, we explore the practice of defining, doing and disseminating education research in and about rural places. We consider the often-overlooked nuances of locational social space, highlighting why it matters to pay attention to these nuances in education research, and why failure to recognise them leads to the production and reproduction of disadvantage for all those marginalised by metro-normative assumptions. In discussing this issue as an ethical concern, we are referencing the broader ethical responsibility around valuing people, places, communities, and lived experiences, and the implications for research that foregrounds such a broader stance, rather than the matters normally raised in institutional ‘ethics approval’ processes that seek to safeguard participants from direct harm.

Valuing the Rural

Informing our view that valuing rurality is an ethical issue is the growing concern in the rural education community about how we ensure that the rural is appropriately valued in education and education research. This has involved consideration and exploration of how we ensure that the rural is recognised as more than just a physical location determined by distance from metropolitan places. We have discussed the importance of this issue in earlier chapters of this book, as well as in previous works, where we identify the implications of viewing the rural in this way as a social justice concern (Roberts & Green, 2013), a form of symbolic violence (Reid et al., 2010; Roberts, 2014), and an influential consideration in rural education research methodology (Roberts & Green, 2013; White & Corbett, 2014b).

Of particular importance in this chapter is the issue that in Australia, Indigenous people, their histories and perspectives, are always a constituent part of rural social space, even when nominally 'absent' from it (Reid et al., 2010). However, Indigenous concerns are often overlooked or separated, even in rural education research. For this reason, we have deliberately chosen to highlight some of the specific ethical and cultural considerations of rural communities to articulate a post-colonial approach to rural research. We do this to point to the ethical need to work in partnership with those we are studying, and to learn how to co-design research that seamlessly includes Indigenous perspectives, rather than separating 'rural' and 'Indigenous' as categories.

Using an ethical lens allows us to acknowledge that how we value the rural has the potential to either benefit or harm rural people (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and rural places, in both symbolic and material ways—as well as 'the rural' as a concept. In what follows, we present examples of research that has been approached from a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014) and values rural social space (Reid et al., 2010), as well as examples of rural research informed by metropolitan perspectives. Each of the examples highlights that how we define, practise, and disseminate rural research has the potential to have a lasting impact on rural people, places, and communities. In taking this rural perspective, our purpose is to suggest that the experiences of valuing the dynamic particularity of places holds insights for education researchers working with, and in, all communities, everywhere.

Thinking About Benefit or Harm

A fundamental principle for research is that potential benefit must outweigh potential harm. This is a starting point for the governance of all research conduct, and the production of knowledge. As a shared moral stance across Western nations, we take it as the starting-point of our chapter, noting that the need for institutionalised regulatory frameworks for the conduct of research on humans suggests that as a society we are not willing to leave this up to individual interpretation. Indeed, it is significant that the

first consideration many researchers give to ethics is often the regulatory framework in which they need to operate, and that ‘ethics approval’ is often seen as a barrier to, or imposition on, the research process. Yet these regulations exist to ensure that research is undertaken with appropriate safeguards to ensure it is beneficial for society and does no harm to participants. The mechanisms of institutional research ethics requirements should go hand-in-hand with a philosophical underpinning to ensure that researchers understand and value the broad principles of ethical design and conduct as well as demonstrate a knowledge of best practices. To this end, attention to the specificities of place suggests that ethical guidelines themselves may benefit from review and consideration of what we suggest here may be the negative impacts that frameworks and regulations which effectively or even literally ignore difference and diversity can have.

At the present time, researchers can draw on national guidelines, institutional ethics boards, school jurisdiction ethics boards, and association codes of conduct to guide them through this process. In Australia, The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007, updated 2018) was developed to ensure that research benefits participants, protects them from possible harm, and is approached in a way that respects everyone involved (the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council and Universities Australia, 2018). In addition, every university and school jurisdiction has its own guidelines and boards of approvals for such processes, and research associations also generally outline ethical expectations of members. An example of this is the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) *Code of Ethics* that includes considerations such as the impact your publications may have on research participants (AARE, 1993). Similarly, many First Nations peoples have, through representative bodies, instituted guidelines for research in and with their communities. These have enabled a national governance framework based on guidelines developed by peak bodies, such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2012) and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2018).

While all these guiding principles are now in place, a strong focus on ethics is relatively new in education research, especially when compared to medical and scientific research (Bibby et al., 1997), possibly due to the perceived difference in the nature of the impact and risks of medical and education studies. This is one reason why we believe the ‘case’ of rural education research assists us to expand current understandings of ethical practice to all educational research: we have for too long underplayed the risks that metrocentric, colonialising research entail. All research has the potential to have lasting impacts on the places and people we work with—both positive and negative. While a research participant may not die or be physically injured during education research, as in health or medical research, they (or their place) can suffer the ongoing injury of being (re-)identified as disadvantaged, ‘failing’, or ‘deficient’. This is particularly evident where the consistent identification and redefinition of rural places as disadvantaged, compared to metropolitan communities, perpetuates and re-produces the marginalisation of rural communities. The lasting effect of this is a major form of harm inflicted upon the rural, an effect that we suggest may be itself potentially unethical in terms of the benefit-harm test. Similarly, there is a

history of deficit-model education imposed on First Nations peoples, including those living beyond the regional, rural, or remote areas in focus here (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Nakata, 2007; Smith, 2012). Indeed, this is the very proposition we encourage researchers to debate, both in terms of rural communities, and of other communities that are perennially the subject of research aimed at ‘improving’ them.

Working Ethically in Rural Communities

Current discussions about ethical thinking in rural education research generally focus on the ethical considerations of working with small, ‘tight-knit’ communities, where the population size creates concerns that may not be present when working in larger communities. One of these challenges is navigating issues of anonymity and confidentiality in small communities (see, e.g., Fuqua, 2019; White & Corbett, 2014b) and other identifiable groups. Ethical guidelines usually require that communities and participants remain anonymous in the dissemination of research, to minimise potential harm. However, while the researcher may de-identify participants when they are disseminating research, community members are often still recognisable to their peers (see, e.g., Fuqua, 2019; White & Corbett, 2014b). Indeed, the digital footprint of the researcher themselves may prove problematic to maintaining participant anonymity depending on their positioning and role within the research. Further, ethical guidelines around identification can create tensions for researchers because they circumscribe potential benefits for rural communities. For example, in the *TERRAnova: renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia Project* (Reid et al., 2012) described in Chapter 3 of this edition, the schools and communities selected as research-sites requested the researchers to name them so that they could publicise their success in retaining teachers, and thereby help sustain it. As such, ethical protocols needed to be renegotiated so that individual case-studies identifying communities could be returned to them to be used as evidence of school, council and community success. And further still, because each individual rural community is unique, anonymising research removes the capacity for attention to the differences *between* communities (Green & Reid, 2014) and allows often inappropriate and inaccurate generalisations to be made. For rural communities, this is a significant problem, as rural differences become unidentifiable, and represented as unimportant in the research (Green & Reid, 2014), an issue that we will return to discuss later in this chapter.

Valuing the rural means that attention must be given to ethical issues far more important than recognising and naming locational difference. Some of these do arise from the small size of rural communities, as this can mean that the knowledge produced and disseminated in research can leave a lasting impact on the community and community members. Valuing the rural, and seeking to understand the meanings of rural social space requires researchers to acknowledge and attend to the relations of power in that space—even when these have involved strategies and hierarchies that have, over time, led to the silencing of particular people, groups, or facets of the

'community' and the privileging of others. Who speaks for this place? Who shares this space but is not heard? Researchers valuing the rural must recognise and raise these profoundly ethical dilemmas for participants and researchers.

Researchers need to ensure they work in a way that is respectful, responsible, and reciprocal by valuing participant stories and being open, transparent, and honest in the research process (Anderson & Lonsdale, 2014). Here, considerations of being a rural insider, or outsider, can influence the research taking place, the relationship between research and participants, and the stories that are shared. As an outsider in a rural community, a researcher may not be privy to the depth of stories and their related histories (Henderson & Lennon, 2014), whereas having a connection to the rural often assists with building trust and rapport with rural people (Kline et al., 2014) and influences what participants may be willing to share with you (Henderson & Lennon, 2014). These issues strongly parallel those raised by Indigenous researchers, as discussed below. They underline the value of rural educational research as a 'case' for reflection and co-creation of theory across what have become distinct academic research fields. With this in mind, discussing historical issues (Farr Darling, 2014) or contentious issues can also be challenging for rural communities, and make navigating one's own positionality in the community more difficult (Henderson & Lennon 2014). Regardless of positionality, it is crucial for a researcher to consider how their values and beliefs influence the research (Kline et al., 2014) and be aware that the way we tell a community's story is significant, as the language we use will impact on the community (Donehower, 2014). This requires a continuous process of reflection and reflexivity to ensure that the voices of community and individual participants are not subverted. And this means, of course, that the ethical imperative of 'beneficence' itself becomes spatialised, and susceptible of emergent and unpredictable disputation during the research process. As educational researchers under funding and accountability regimes that require certainty, efficiency, and measurement, we currently have no way of satisfactorily dealing with this profoundly important ethical issue.

In summary, then, the remainder of this chapter argues that a crucial component of understanding the impact of our research is attention to valuing the particularity of people, places, and communities. That is, we highlight that there is a need to recognise that the rural is more than just a physical location, defined by its distance from metropolitan places, and is instead a complex (co-)construction, incorporating considerations of the intersecting relations between place, people, and what they do, over time (Reid et al., 2010). Researchers seeking to enter *any* space for the purposes of obtaining information about the people who live and work there, must be alert to the responsibilities they take on when entering that space, and the presumptions that have framed their entry. We turn now to think about how we *define* the objects of our inquiry, how we *do* the work of researching in place, often *with* Indigenous people, and how we *disseminate* the knowledge and perceptions we generate in and from the rural. We want to encourage us all, as researchers, to think about the benefit or harm that research may have on the rural, and by extrapolation any community that is positioned outside the norm.

Defining Rural Research

Here we consider what makes a research study a *rural* research study, how this impacts rural communities, and why this is an ethical concern. In doing so, we highlight that the way research studies consider and conceptualise rurality influences how rural communities are perceived and understood. To demonstrate this issue, and the ethical implications of this, we draw on an analysis of rural education research in Australia and discuss the persistent concern about rural education disadvantage. This, we suggest, is analogous with notions of ‘urban’ disadvantage and research that often considers the ‘city’ as a distinct entity—whereas cities themselves consist of diverse communities with particular strengths and challenges.

As identified in Chapter 2 of this book (Roberts and Guenther), ‘rural’ is understood, described, and identified in many ways in education research. These definitions generally fall into two different categories of approaches to understanding the rural. One approach focuses on identifying the rural as the amalgam of sites that are geographically distant from metropolitan centres, and/or an individual site with small population numbers (Guenther et al., 2015). It is clear that quantitative and statistical studies seeking to identify patterns to allow systems to predict effects of future policy or other intervention across large-scale educational populations have traditionally worked with this approach to defining the rural. Yet qualitative educational research also often utilises such definitions to differentiate population groups, and we argue that both of these can be problematic. Importantly too, there is an ongoing need to attend to the colonising impact of definitions, as Fig. 18.1 demonstrates.

The metrocentricity and colonial assumptions that produced this sort of representation still linger in the unconscious assumptions about the rural, and Indigenous, that still underpin much educational research more generally.

The other approach claims that the problem with knowledge produced under such definitional regimes is that it can be misleading and inadequate, because it homogenises and therefore misrepresents that which is heterogeneous and complex. Place-conscious research identifies that the rural is multifaceted, and not susceptible to generalisation across the differences in environmental, economic, and demographic histories that constitute its multiplicity. It further argues that quantitative definitions of the rural are inadequate for interpretative, qualitative research that seeks to understand and interpret in the interests of social justice (Reid et al., 2010). To this end, there are many influential works identifying that considering the rural in the latter way matters when it comes to understanding rural education (see, e.g., Howley et al., 2005; Reid et al., 2010; Roberts & Green, 2013; White & Corbett, 2014b).

The ethical need for clarity about the difference in research methodologies that adopt these two definitional approaches is apparent in Roberts & Downes’ (2016) recent examination of qualitative journal articles that reference the ‘rural’. Studies that operate with an objective, statistical definition of the rural were overwhelmingly found to lack a rural sensibility, or a moral commitment to the communities and people they studied. They often focused on a particular phenomenon or intervention

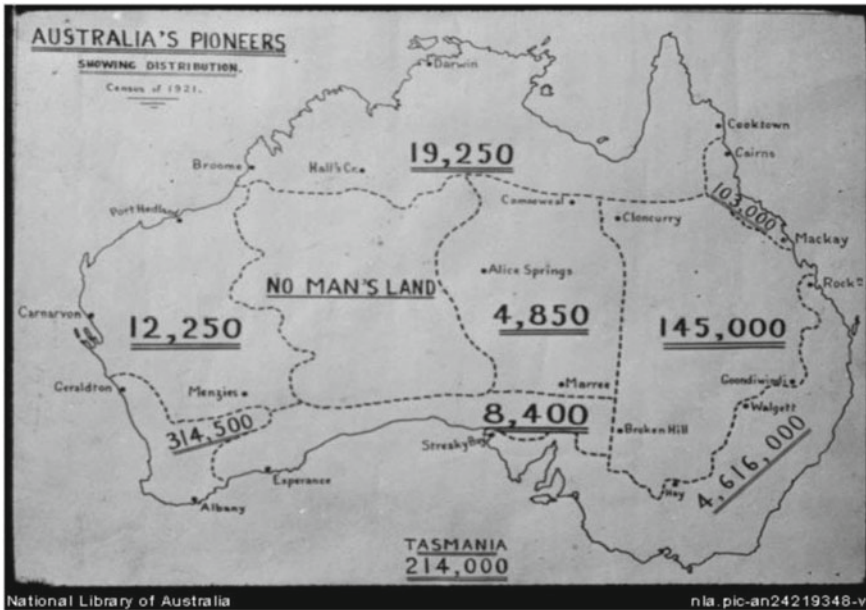


Fig. 18.1 *Census Distribution 1921* (from the National Library of Australia, in Reid et al. 2012, p. 81)

(such as a teaching innovation; implementation of policy in areas such as online education; or reforms in early childhood education), and studied what these looked like in a ‘rural’ school marked as different from a metropolitan school only by its location and/or size. Such quantitative definitions of the rural essentialise both rural and metropolitan diversity in their overgeneralisation, and call into question the utility and benefit of the knowledge they produce to either constituency. They cannot provide evidence of whether the issues discussed are influenced by, or related to, rurality, or if the location was incidental to the study and the same findings may have been evident in a metropolitan school (Coladarci, 2007). Furthermore, the issues explored were generally informed by attention to rural disadvantage. That is, the studies focused on evaluating a programme that had been implemented in a rural school as a solution to solve the problem of perceived rural disadvantage, or, the studies were justified by the presumption of rural disadvantage. Studies using the latter approach to defining the rural, however, generally tried to challenge dominant understandings of disadvantage by understanding how rurality added to understandings of the issue (Roberts & Green, 2013), and highlighted rural *difference and diversity* rather than metrocentrically-determined rural *disadvantage*.

It is through considering the implications of the two different approaches that we can understand why how we define rural becomes an ethical concern. When locational and population-based studies dominate the literature, education, education policy, and education research, alike, become ‘spatially blind’ as rural and urban schools

are measured against the same standards and expectations (Green & Letts, 2007). Similarly, the historical problematising of Indigenous education through the ‘deficit approach’ (Craven et al., 2016, pp. 33–34) imposes a layer of paternalism in teaching and research. This undermines the recognition of commonalities in rural settings, ignores the strengths of local knowledge and culture and normalises the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes. The implicit standards and expectations have a metropolitan and non-Indigenous reference-point as metropolitan schools form the dominant education group (Guenther et al., 2015; Roberts, 2016; Roberts & Green, 2013). Research is then informed by a perspective of disadvantage which creates a cycle whereby further disadvantage is continually identified and reinforced. If, however, education research is grounded in a consideration of rurality, and takes a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014) that requires the recognition of the effects of history, environment, and power as constituting the object of research, there is an evidence base to enable education leaders, policy-makers, and researchers to identify the underlying assumptions about how and why rural disadvantage is constructed. By doing this, the structural inequalities and the dominant standards of measurement can be identified and questioned in relation their relevance to the rural (Roberts, 2016). Disadvantage and negative stories around the rural can be challenged and rearticulated from a rural standpoint. As the movement towards decolonising Indigenous knowledges, research, and pedagogies disrupts existing norms of power and meaning, a rural standpoint highlights a more positive view about rural schools and communities, one that has the potential to benefit the rural.

Researchers also need to be mindful of defining the rural from an ‘outsider’ perspective and consider how they describe each community they work with. While we aim to highlight our research participants’ experiences and understandings of their place, we still only have a snapshot of participants’ towns and participants’ perceptions, regardless of whether we are insiders or outsiders in the community (Fuqua, 2019). Our choice of whose voice we listen to must be recognised as a *selection*, and one that cannot necessarily ‘represent’ the whole community. The brief snapshot we receive of a community when we visit for a short period of time may not be enough to develop informed opinions, or the relationships of trust that are essential in partnering in First Nations research, for example. As researchers, we have generally not experienced the community in the same way as any of our participants, some of whom are descendants from that land, or have lived there for decades (Fuqua, 2019). For Indigenous populations in the rural, this becomes even more important. A colonial legacy has resulted in the assumption that ‘authentic’ Indigenous populations are only located in remote or wilderness contexts (Harris & Prout Quicke, 2019), and such a view fails to fully understand the relational tensions and structures that characterise Indigenous population movements and identities. Furthermore, we acknowledge that, from an Indigenous perspective, there was/is no rural. For Indigenous people, the idea of ‘country’ is conceptually incommensurate with non-Indigenous ideas of ‘country’ as anything that is not ‘city’. But it is conceptually aligned to non-Indigenous ideas of Country as nation, or homeland, although the connection to Country on which Indigenous cultures are founded has been overwritten and silenced by Western traditions. The connection to Country is

what forces researchers to decentre and destabilise understandings of Indigenous culture. That is, there were, and are, many Indigenous nations, all of whom identify with their own ‘country’, and these connections are almost entirely incommensurate with the overlay of classifications of urban, rural, regional, and remote geographic areas (or even the state jurisdictional areas) across our continent. Our advocacy for the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in rural research in this chapter begins with the need for attention to Indigeneity in rural social space. This is crucial for education researchers dealing with people, but it is just the first step, and must lead to attention to forms of knowledge and relationship to place that are rooted in the land itself. The problematic nature of definitions imposed from the outside highlight the importance of decolonising our research methods and approaches to our research sites, as an essential aspect of valuing the rural.

Doing Rural Research

The methodology selected for a rural research study will either act as an enabler for considering rurality, or alternatively, situate the approach of a study within a metropolitan perspective. Research methods with a metropolitan bias can contribute to positioning the rural as disadvantaged or frame the rural from a deficit perspective (Craven et al., 2016; White & Corbett, 2014a). In turn, this creates the danger of bias in how we interpret research findings, and in our resulting understandings of rural communities and people. To illustrate this issue, we focus on the use and interpretation of quantitative data, using the example of the *MySchool* website, and then a study about the Australian Curriculum in rural regional and remote schools.

As was shown by Roberts, Their, and Beach in Chapter 8 of this edition, the categories used in quantitative data can have very different outcomes depending on the type of groupings constructed. The *MySchool* website (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, ACARA, 2019) that compares all schools in Australia exemplifies this issue, as it compares schools from all around the country, using the same standards of measurement. This allows supposedly disadvantaged and problematic schools to be highlighted as they are not reaching the (imposed) benchmark used in the quantitative data (Guenther et al., 2014). This is a benchmark that is informed by the dominant group, where all schools are compared using the same standards and points of measurements. The specificities of the schools and communities that demonstrate their difference from the norm and each other are no longer evident (Roberts, 2016), reinforcing the idea of ‘like’ schools (Guenther et al., 2015; Thomson, 2012). However, incorporating spatial thinking into research methodology, such as researching from a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014), highlights that the overarching patterns in such comparative datasets do not exist when different scales are used. For example, while rural schools appear to perform badly on standardised test results, a measure available on *MySchool* website, there are factors such as availability of curriculum subjects and the valuing of rural knowledges, as examples, that contribute to these issues (Roberts, 2016), but which are not factored into the

comparison. Consideration of these factors is not evident when only exploring a large dataset that compares all schools at a general level. While the use of quantitative data enables us to identify general problems that may not otherwise have been evident, further investigation is needed to understand why the data highlights the factors that they do (Roberts, 2016).

This example highlights that, while the importance of what quantitative data can tell us must be acknowledged, this should not be used in isolation (Roberts & Green, 2013). Further illustrating this is the example of a study initially undertaken by Drummond et al. (2012) which was later reanalysed using a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2017). The original study (*Implementing the Australian Curriculum in Rural, Regional, Remote and Distance Education Schools*) focused on identifying the concerns felt by rural, remote, and distance education school leaders about the implementation of the national curriculum (Drummond et al., 2012). Statistical methods were used to analyse a questionnaire completed by school leaders, which highlighted that they were not confident that the national curriculum would benefit their schools (Drummond et al., 2012). In the reanalysis, the data was approached from a rural standpoint, valuing knowledge based in rural experience, or 'rural meanings' (Downes & Roberts, 2015), and the different specificities of rural places were valued and given attention (Roberts, 2014). This approach identified that many of the apparent negative responses about the national curriculum in the first analysis actually related to a concern about the curriculum's silence about rurality and rural knowledges (Roberts, 2017). For example, while participants felt their school could gain little from the national curriculum, this was based on their belief that the Australian Curriculum would not allow for the inclusion of rural community knowledges (Roberts, 2017). A rural standpoint approach allowed more useful understanding of what underpinned participants' concerns, by exploring rural meanings and rural accounts of the world (Roberts, 2017). Through this approach, rural communities' perspectives and concerns were valued, which meant they could be acted upon in a way that benefits rural people and communities (Roberts, 2014).

Although these examples highlight that attention to how rurality influences the way that research is actually carried out on data from rural participants, valuing the rural also means attending to issues in designing an inquiry, entering and leaving the field of research, and the conduct of researchers in the field. A consciousness of place, and rural social space, foregrounds design and practice that recognises rural difference and complexity, and can pose a unique set of ethical challenges, because no two rural places, and no two Indigenous Nations, are the same. Researchers need to take the time to get to understand the rural social space that they are studying at that particular time, or risk being biased or misinformed by their lack of attention to contestations and inconsistencies within it. As Corbett (2014) shows us, the concept of 'community' cannot be taken for granted. Furthermore, Indigenous rural research requires an additional and deeper understanding of the historical impacts of colonialism, in which education has been explicitly implicated, and the interruptions to the lives and education of First Nations' peoples, spaces, and places. In Australia, for instance, there is not one, but many experiences of how this occurred,

and hundreds of distinct nations of people across Australia whose identities are separate yet connected to each other. Research without attention to this risks reinforcing rural education disadvantage, rather than identifying rural difference.

Rural Indigenous Research

Crucial to understanding and researching with attention to rural social space is consideration of the people, and therefore, the place, position, and history of Indigenous participants, identities, and standpoints. One of the key issues identified in the analysis of rural education research in Australia (Roberts & Downes, 2016) was the virtual absence of explicit consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. However, in a review of remote education research, it is noted that the term ‘remote’ was often considered synonymously with ‘Indigenous’ research (Guenther et al., 2019). In such studies, there was little engagement with rurality or Indigeneity, brought together relationally. That is, *either* Indigeneity *or* rurality, was focused upon. In some cases, the meanings of *neither* of these key contextualising frames for the data that was collected was attended to—the study simply included ‘Indigenous’ peoples who happened to be located in a ‘remote’ place. We also note here the link to the earlier point about the categories used to define spaces, including colonial identities, with the distinct difference observed here between two gradations of what are often conflated as ‘non-metropolitan’.

When thinking about research in *any* rural social space, the inclusion, or exclusion, of Indigenous peoples’ perspectives is an ethical concern, as Indigenous peoples are likely to be part of the population (Reid et al., 2010). As Rowsell (2019, p. 65) says:

Where we live and the surrounding localities carry histories with their own stories, tensions and belief systems. Of course spaces change – some quite radically – and histories unfold, but the stories and legacies of the past do not disappear, but rather fold into present day stories.

Space does not obliterate the traces of the past, and Indigenous spaces and stories are central to the geographical and ecological landscapes across Australia, their development, and their social histories. In this section, we will focus on what it means to work respectfully with Indigenous peoples in rural and remote communities in this country. As highlighted earlier, we acknowledge that the need to include Indigenous perspectives in all elements of an ethical valuing of the rural is imperative, but it is in the *doing* of rural education research that we see the potential for the greatest impact. Our aim here is to identify principles as a starting point, to understand the need to seamlessly integrate Indigenous voices and perspectives in a respectful way that uses decolonising practices to ensure these are listened to and heard.

Actioning of research from a moral as well as ethical position is considered internationally to nurture a high level of credibility among Indigenous participants, meet philosophical as well as governance standards, and minimise risk of harm (Sehlin-MacNeil & Marsh, 2015). The search for new knowledge must always involve

working *with* Indigenous people, through a research approach that is mindful of Indigenous values, priorities, and guided by practical as well as philosophical principles of respect and reciprocal benefit. The effort required to build this cooperative and collaborative relationship needs to be taken into account by researchers at the outset of a research proposal. As an Indigenous woman, one of the authors felt a moral obligation and took many steps in the early stages of her doctoral work (Marsh, 2011), for example, to ensure that the focus of her thesis was relevant to the Adnyamathanha community, long before she began gathering any data or commencing the official stages of fieldwork. This combination of moral and ethical commitment is a critical part of negotiating entry into the field—an area that is often not well acknowledged, yet critical to maximising benefits to community (Martin, 2008). This approach requires structural alterations in the research process, including through research governance beginning with a new research proposal structure. For example, rethinking the development of research proposals and the purpose of methods is one way of restructuring the process. An initial step in research that prioritises ethics as the first method for inquiry (Howitt, 2011) advocates going beyond ethnographic interviews and yarning circles, and reciprocity; this step of embedding the ethics protocol within the ‘methods’ section of a proposal emphasises relational as well as structural reform of the research process. This reflects an ethical standpoint, and clearly defines the relational meanings and practices of ethical conduct.

The use of Indigenous Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Nakata, 2007) within research is available to anyone working with Indigenous peoples and cultures, regardless of location (rural, metropolitan, or remote). The emphasis on prioritising Indigenous voices in research is widely recognised as critically important (Rigney, 1997; Smith, 2012), however, the extent to which this occurs remains overshadowed by a lack of understanding or willingness to forgo the colonised spaces within research, and attend to the histories always already ‘folded in’ to the stories it constructs. Lead researchers must create spaces for adopting engagement strategies or ways of working that go beyond symbolic recognition and a deficit approach. Researchers must also learn to work with Indigenous people in Indigenous spaces, based on mutual respect and genuine interest throughout all stages of research planning, project implementation, dissemination of findings, and acquittal of research activities. A set of culturally appropriate methods, prior to project commencement, goes hand-in-hand with underlying principles of valuing Indigenous sovereignties, respecting Indigenous priorities, and achieving mutually beneficial outcomes in research.

Indigenous Standpoint theory and practice is one way to foster relationships based on reciprocity and direct benefit to Indigenous participants throughout the entire research process. Its use is entirely congruent with the notion of a rural standpoint that respects the specificity of space, but provides additional support for researchers as they are planning, preparing, and *doing* their work. Respect for intellectual and cultural property rights, and the right to prior and informed consent in research, is not always the past experience of communities, and this may also be the case for some researchers. Readiness at community level to engage in such a way should not be taken for granted and may need to be nurtured throughout the research process

by creating critical self-reflective and reflexive opportunities, that may take time and disrupt the normative standard of control and efficiency in research. A lead researcher should encourage opportunities to introduce, discuss, and debate these matters with community, and not just assume that people are familiar and comfortable with an emancipatory way of doing research. As Reid notes in Chapter 17 of this edition, an ethical stance towards research that respects an Indigenous standpoint, or a rural standpoint, can often ‘take longer’ and ‘cost more’, for example, and this needs clear recognition as an ethical standard for the nation.

Positionality is another key feature of Indigenous Standpoint theory that explores and clarifies the researcher’s identity, cultural biases, previous engagement and credibility, and the potential risks and attributes that a particular researcher brings to the research environment. It is a common practice for Indigenous researchers to make it their business to develop an awareness of methodological issues and principles (Foley, 2003; Kincheloe, 2006; Rigney, 1997; Smith, 2012) and to form an interactive relationship with community groups and individuals. These principles acknowledge the dual role as insider/outsider when interacting with research collaborators or participants, particularly in representing and interpreting Indigenous people’s views in writing. Applying this principle to the scoping of new projects and negotiating entry into the field helps articulate the ways in which a researcher’s presence influences the research environment particularly in regard to the power dynamics. This approach actively responds to and demonstrates awareness of Rigney’s claim that ‘... historically, Australian policies and educational institutions have been marinated in cultural and racial social engineering theories’ (Rigney, 1997, p. 111).

Indigenous research governance mechanisms offer standardised principles in regard to issues such as data collection and storage. Indigenous research ethical standards and practices are governed at a national level by the two Indigenous peak bodies known as AIATSIS and the Lowitja Institute, as well as the National Health and Medical Research Council. These guidelines are administered through nationally-accredited Human Research Ethics Committees and regional bodies such as the AHREC (Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee). Higher education and research institutions will place their own variation on how Indigenous research ethics is governed, however, the overarching focus remains fixed on ensuring that institutions meet their obligations to deliver research outcomes and acquit research money in the most efficient manner. Much of how fieldwork is actually conducted still relies on existing relationships with relevant individuals to minimise risks or harm to community, to ensure real benefits to Indigenous community-based people, and to demonstrate an ongoing research commitment to community. Multiple levels of scrutiny as part of ethics governance are enacted through a reciprocal process designed to streamline and not hinder research; however, this may not be sufficient in building and strengthening research capability or ensuring minimal harm to Indigenous participants. Australian standards of Indigenous research governance may be regarded as well-advanced compared to some countries where human research ethics and Indigenous engagement are not considered priorities in research. But these do not prevent the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous peoples or knowledges, nor do

complaints processes as currently realised ensure a culturally competent means of raising concerns.

What this section of the chapter highlights is that, as raced and classed subjects ourselves, we need to make sure that the things we ‘naturally’ take for granted do not blind us to the possibility of ‘other’ standpoints. Without careful attention to the meanings of Indigenous subjectivities and standpoints in rural social space, as an integral part of a rural standpoint, educational researchers can be blind to the significance of what they are seeing, and what they are reporting on in their research.

Disseminating Rural Research

Many of the examples provided in this chapter also exemplify that how we disseminate our research needs to be a key consideration when thinking about the impact of research in and for rural communities. If, for example, we continue to publish the dominant view that rural schools are disadvantaged, then horror stories about rural schools and communities dominate public discussion. As highlighted by Reid and colleagues (2010), when schools are ‘named and shamed’ in such a way, they are subject to a form of symbolic violence, and therefore our research can cause harm to rural communities and to the life chances of the children we are purporting to serve. Narratives such as these are discussed publicly, and people may become less likely to consider rural communities as a place to live, work, and send their children to school. On the contrary, if we situate our research within other published work and incorporate a rural standpoint, we are positioning the audience to investigate and question the underlying structural inequities involved in creating and sustaining the apparent disadvantage.

To illustrate this issue, we return to a recent study of rural education research in Australian journals (Roberts & Downes, 2016) where the difference between studies that incorporated a rural standpoint was evident. Many of the articles identified in this journal analysis as not engaging with rurality were studies that only provided descriptive information about a scenario or issue in a rural school. Problematically, most of these studies were either undertaken in response to identified rural disadvantage, or they described the outcome of a programme that was used to overcome the disadvantage. Studies such as these did not challenge the reader to look further to identify what might be occurring beyond the disadvantage described. However, studies that were undertaken from a rural standpoint enabled the reader to focus on understanding how and why the disadvantage was produced. Such work shifted the focus to identifying and questioning underlying power structures and inequalities, thus empowering the research participants (Lanas & Rautio, 2014) and benefiting rural people and communities. Incorporating theory into education research helps us understand an issue, rather than just providing a description about what is evident on first examination.

An example of the two possible ways of reporting rural education research and the different outcomes they can have is rural students’ literacy scores in standardised

testing. There are many studies that show that rural students lag behind metropolitan students on standardised testing (e.g. Thomson et al., 2017). Reports such as these contribute to the narrative of disadvantage for rural people and places, by reporting on a standardised measure in isolation, without reference to rural education theory. However, if these results are examined from a rural standpoint, we are better placed to understand that it is not necessarily the case that students lack literacy skills—rather, they practise different (rural) literacies and utilise diverse knowledges and skills. Examples of research that highlights this include: the rural literacies works (Donehower et al., 2007; Green & Corbett, 2013), accounts of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003a, b), and understandings of rural knowledges (Downes & Roberts, 2015; Roberts, 2016). Presenting research data in a descriptive manner framed within a metrocentric rationality only provides the audience with information to draw negative conclusions about rural schools. However, by drawing on theory we are better placed to understand the underlying issues contributing to low literacy scores, which empowers communities (Lanas & Rautio, 2014) and allows us to think beyond apparent failures. The examples highlight that when we are presenting our work to an audience, we need to help them understand not only what is happening, but why it is happening.

Conclusion

From an ethical perspective, it is evident that considering rurality when we *define, do,* and *disseminate* rural research can be either beneficial or harmful to rural communities and people. Researching in (or about) a rural place is always researching somewhere, and the importance of rurality and ‘placing’ rural research remains a key issue for researchers. As we have argued here, crucially embedded within this ethics is a willingness and ability to work *with* Indigenous peoples, rather than either overlooking the histories that have produced the places we work in as social spaces, or doing research *about* Indigenous peoples and cultures. Through examples from each of the authors’ works, we have illustrated why such considerations matter, and more specifically, why they are inherently important in challenging the metrocentric approaches to understanding the rural in education policy and practice that have for so long-dominated rural schools and communities. Thinking ethically about rural research requires a theoretical lens that attends to the differences in how interrelated complexities and affordances of particular geographies, demographics, and economies are realised and manifested in different rural places according to their historical and ongoing relationships. Can we as researchers really say we are doing no harm to participants if we fail to consider how being rural impacts their actions, day-to-day lives, policy, practice, and the social and spatial relations that are occurring? Ignoring these differences impacts on the outcomes of the research, and by default, rural people and communities, policy, and education practice. This chapter is by no means an exhaustive rulebook on ethical rural research; it is, however, a starting point for researchers seeking to expand their thinking about what it means to

value rural people, places, and communities, by using an ethical lens to understand the impact of different approaches to research.

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Chapter 19

People, Places, and Communities in an Urban Century: Broadening Rural Education Research



Melyssa Fuqua and Philip Roberts

Abstract In this chapter, the editors of this edition revisit the primary themes and goals of the volume. We draw together the key insights from contributing authors working within the field of rural education research and highlight how their work can inform rural and urban-based research and education practices by way of advancements in theories, methodological considerations, disciplines in education, and schooling choices. The need to engage with the complexities of rurality and the fundamental assertion that *context matters* underpins the chapters of this edition and the concluding thoughts of the editors here. Finally, we offer some implications, provocations, and thought-lines for the future of the fields of rural education research and education research more generally.

In the international literature, it is reasonably well established that rural areas face a number of educational challenges. These challenges include lower rates of early childhood education, lower rates of matriculation to university, higher rates of vocational education subjects, lower school retention and senior secondary completion, lower literacy and numeracy scores and less access to the breadth of the curriculum (Brown & Schafft, 2018; Halsey, 2018). Consequently, much rural education appears to be motivated to address the different educational outcomes and achievement levels of rural, regional, and remote students. Typically, this research revolves around issues of access to a full curriculum; access to further education and training; the attraction and retention of staff; the socioeconomic composition of rural populations and regions; and the implications of higher, and increasing, Indigenous and minority group populations. Arguments in these areas are usually predicated upon notions of equity for rural regions and rural people, the economic development of regions, and the human capital development of rural populations.

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The problem, as we see it, is that the arguments about the levels of rural achievement and development are usually *about* rural communities and framed in comparison with a metrocentric norm (Roberts & Green, 2013). While many will seek to position the researcher with rural communities, they are often still motivated by notions of disadvantage. Even though they are clearly ethically motivated to empower rural communities, they do little to alter the conditions that create the unequal gradient in the first instance. This may be because much of the research in rural education has tended to emanate from within the discipline of education, and often only draws on, the broader fields of the humanities and the social sciences in a limited sense. That is, the processes and practices of education as a system of knowledge are naturalised. More so, this naturalised vision of education is metrocentric in character, and dominated by the interests of the urban population, which make up the global majority (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016).

Through this volume, we have aimed to *rural* education research—to broaden the way rural education research is conceived and constructed. This is a deliberate political project of speaking back to (metropolitan) power. To achieve this, the authors in this volume have illustrated approaches that researchers can employ as allies of rural communities. Furthermore, authors have begun the work of re-thinking the disciplines of education from a rural standpoint. We suggest that scholarship is needed on both these axis of reform in order to affect lasting change that enhances the power, and position, of rural communities. Without systemic reform in how researchers engage with the rural it will be condemned to remaining something of a curiosity to research, or not actually impact the forces that position the rural as marginal. Neither of these approaches serve the long-term interests of rural communities.

On Not Defining Rurality

The ‘rural’ has been defined by the major centres of metropolitan power and not in its own terms. Over the last decade we have witnessed some of the social and political fractures that are partly related to the economic impacts of such an imbalance of power. These emerging political issues highlight the importance of understanding the rural through multiple interconnected constructions. Here the work of rural studies, as explored in Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume, is important. Engaging with the multiple definitions of rurality is an important step in defining, and constructing, the object of research as our balance between social, cultural, geographic, demographic, or economic dimensions carries with it implications for methodology and the methods we employ.

Our point here is not to reprise the debates from rural studies in the mid-2000s (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016)—though they are useful guides for new researchers to the field. Indeed, the actual definitional conclusion one operationalises in their research is not in itself the significant issue. It is that one does so (operationalises a definition) in order to clearly understand how the rural is constructed in relation to the research task at hand. When we do not define what we mean by ‘rural’ we

are allowing dominant perceptions to prevail. More so, the act of defining the rural in our research helps us reflect on the limitations and affordances of our research approaches, consider the forces constructing the rural and the phenomena we are exploring, and temper our conclusions. Ideally, we would like the rural education field, and the discipline of education, to ultimately arrive at a position akin to that of rural studies. Authors in rural studies no longer go out of their way to define the rural in contemporary publications. However, the influence of the definitional work is clearly evident in the background through the way in which the rural is prefaced, the phenomena constructed, and the way in which the research is approached and written. That is, it is foundational and understood by the field.

Engaging with ‘rural’ as a complex concept is what makes the field of rural education distinct. However, rural needs to be more than a neutral site or justification for study because it is different or disadvantaged compared to other places. Such approaches only perpetuate the violence inflicted on rural communities and its production as a deviant and deficit space. Denying the ruralness of research implicitly situates it elsewhere, and in so doing privileges metrocentric notions of education (Roberts & Green, 2013). As such, we do not support Biddle et al. (2019)’s proposition that identifying research as rural may result in a lack of impact for our research. Rather we contend that to *not* be rural is to *not* have positive impact on the communities we aim to support; by not identifying as rural, it has a profound impact in devaluing rurality and empowering dominant metronormative discourses.

Building the Field of Rural Education Research Outward

The field of rural education research continues to create means and methodologies to push back against the metrocentric norms and deficit discourse shaped by an increasingly urbanised global community while advocating for rural spaces, places, and people. Recent trends in rural education scholarship seek to highlight the diversity of rural places, schools, and people in order to explore how education can make the best and most strategic use of the local areas’ abundant resources. In promoting the strengths of the rural—that are not necessarily reflected in the urban-developed policies from various jurisdictions around the world, many researchers are arguing against the ever-encroaching and increasingly harmful neoliberal policies (see Chapters 6 and 7 in this edition and works such as Cuervo, 2016).

In Australia and the USA, the concept of ‘rural education’ as a field of research is fairly well established (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020). To date, much of the weight of scholarship in the rural education field has explored topics such as teacher education or unpacking the differences in achievement and aspirations of rural youth, grounded in the often negative portrayal applied to the quality of rural education and teachers in public and policy discourse. A perusal of leading rural education journals demonstrates that many of the current ‘hot topics’ in research are built on long, rich bodies of work. These are strong and established sub-disciplines that offer many insights. There continues to be an exploration of the challenges and successes in placing

preservice teachers, recruiting new staff, and retaining existing staff in rural schools (Downes & Roberts, 2018), which have been the focus of scholars across centuries and continents (Biddle & Azano, 2016). There is also a continuing consideration into developing rural youth aspirations and an ongoing conversation about who stays, who leaves, who returns, and who chooses to move to rural communities—a conversation that came to the forefront with Corbett’s (2007) seminal work *Learning to Leave* and continues in the work of such academics as Tieken (2016) in the USA and Fuqua (2019), Cuervo (2016), and Farrugia (2018) in Australia (also see Chapters 9, 15, and 16 of this edition). Additionally, the ongoing theoretical debates around whose knowledge counts (Roberts, 2014) and the role and conceptualisations of community, place, and social space (Chapters 3 and 4 and Reid et al., 2010) have taken on new importance in the increasingly standardised and globalised education sector. So, in this edition, the authors have drawn from these deep wells of thought and progress in order to share them with those who may not be familiar with these approaches—who may not have considered research with the adjective ‘rural’. The perspectives of rural researchers who have ruminated on these topics, in some cases for decades, should be of use to researchers and educators in other contexts. As an established field, we can now shift the agenda to speak outward to other fields and work to reform the other disciplines with confidence, evidence, and authority rather than primarily focusing on establishing rural education as a ‘legitimate’ field of inquiry.

Context Matters

While this edition has a heavy focus on Australian rural education, the perspectives and examples from international authors and contexts highlight that there is a similarity amongst themes while simultaneously reinforcing the message that ‘*context matters*’ (Downey, Chapter 5). Rural people and places have been marginalised and so we have been adapting, developing education practices, pedagogies, and research methodologies to best serve our youth. Insights from rural people from their own contexts are necessary for future successes of their students and their communities, and we believe can be helpful in developing successful outcomes for students and communities in other contexts. In this vein, the authors in this edition seek to follow in the footsteps of, and build on, the work of the authors in White and Corbett’s (2014) *Doing Educational Research in Rural Settings: Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions*. The authors in that edition shared their perspectives on methodological considerations in rural research which included insights into ‘best practice’ to be applied to any research project. Such is the intention here. The challenges facing rural education are not solely rural challenges—developing student aspirations in any context is a just goal of educators, questioning the power dynamics underpinning the ‘important’ knowledge is a critical undertaking in education. Issues such as those raised in this edition are critical

to education across political or geographical borders even if they do not manifest themselves in the same way.

Context, as used here, goes beyond a description of the features of the situation (Seddon, 1993), to include their social construction and particularities. In this work, rural education research has been heavily influenced by the spatial turn in social theory (Gulson & Symes, 2007). Indeed, rural education researchers have arguably led the adoption and rearticulation of place-based education. Here we see a typical pattern where ideas of place, as advocated by Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b) have found resonance with rural education researchers as providing a tool and metaphor that aligns with pre-existing orientations. Emerging from urban education in the USA, these ideas have been adopted by rural researchers. However, the articulations and advancements of these concepts by rural education researchers have found limited re-engagement in urban settings. Instead, place-based education has tended to evolve along two paths: one urban and one rural, with limited cross-fertilisation of emerging ideas and theory. Many authors in this volume seek to square the ledger on this account by illustrating how place has evolved as a concept for educational research and practice, and how it provides new insights for urban researchers.

In this spatial turn, the work of Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) has also been influential. That these works emanate from the city, Paris and Los Angeles respectively, does not lessen the significance of their insights. Key amongst these insights is that space is *produced*, and not a unitary descriptor. This highlights the key problem of how much research focused on ‘improving’ rural education, often not by rural education scholars, positions rural as a fixed category. Countering this, the spatial turn (Gulson & Symes, 2007) reinforces that space is perceived, conceived, and lived (Lefebvre, 1991) and that, in our case, the rural can be real and imagined (Soja, 1996). Through engaging with these concepts rural education researchers have been able to again operationalise and rearticulate theory and are now in a position to reshape the discipline of education through these insights. One of the most significant insights is that the rural is not solely relational to metropolitan; it is produced through multiple influences (see Chapter 2). The production of rural space may include relational elements, but critically it also includes independent elements. If researchers do not engage the production of rural space (see Chapter 3) as genuinely including independent constituting parts, they only serve to reproduce its subordinate relationship to the metropolitan.

A Spark of Inspiration

As we compiled this edition, we were reminded of experiences from our time as rural educators and projects developed by some of our students. An example of these projects—to use as a metaphor—was a group of students who wanted to make pieces of furniture. They started with a bench for one of their mothers’ gardens and then a workspace for their teacher. Other students became interested and the building efforts expanded to, amongst other items, picnic tables to be placed around the school and

community, rain gauges for the agriculture teacher and local residents, and Christmas ornaments to give away. To accomplish this, they had to reflect on what was needed in their place and what skills they had which could be further developed. They also had to negotiate with the principal and the various local businesses and community members for resources. Much of the material came from repurposed pallets donated by the local silo makers and money from the school to buy the screws and lacquer the hardware store offered at a discount—materials which came from elsewhere and had been intended for a variety of different purposes. Students used teamwork to build the items within the constraints of the system (e.g. the school's timetable restricting their availability, as well as legislation and school policies mediating their ambitions particularly in the woodshop). The work was hard, but the students deemed the efforts worth pursuing. In the end, they had pieces they were proud of and that enriched the experiences of the people around them. Most items were designed for a specific local purpose, but some were portable and suitable in other contexts—like the teacher's workspace which now finds itself hundreds of kilometres away from its origin. It is just as useful in the Big Smoke as it was in the rural town.

Those students identified needs in their local community, brainstormed ways to address the need, completed their projects with the support and assistance from local community members, and created improvements in their space for themselves and others. The contributors of this edition have done much the same thing. Many of the contributing authors began their careers as rural educators and/or grew up in rural places. Their experiences inspired and shaped their research as they built on their existing skills and knowledge to address local issues. Much of this research repurposed the 'materials' from urban-based research—for example the conceptualisation of space as discussed above—and required collaboration from rural community members to adapt them and make them useful for their context. As Reid highlights in Chapter 17, there are policies that mediate these research ambitions particularly involving funding, but rural researchers continue to find a way. Through hard work and teamwork in building the discipline of rural education research, they developed pieces that they are proud of and that aim to enrich the experiences of rural people. As the contributing authors here have demonstrated, theories, methods, and fields that were developed in specific local contexts are also portable and useful in the Big Smokes of the world.

Implications and Provocations

In this section, we revisit the main themes articulated by the contributing authors and propose possibilities for future developments. The two primary goals of this edition were to broaden the scholarship on rural education by explicitly linking it with other domains of education research, and to highlight rural as a constituent part of those fields. To review the extent to which we met those goals, we have collated the themes as presented by authors into broad categories around the advancement of theory, methodology, and specific educational fields. In doing so, we tease out possible

implications and pose provocations for advancements not only in rural education research, but in the wider body of education research.

Theory

The overwhelming message from contributing authors is a call to recognise and resist the inherent, and often insidious, power relations that ground many of the theories present in education research. The opening chapters of this volume largely focus on various conceptualisations and definitions of *rural*, *community*, and *place*. These authors make the case that to know one's students, one must know the place they are in. Roberts and Guenther in Chapter 2 lay out the complexities and dangers in the act of labelling (or not) places, with the potential for symbolic violence to already marginalised groups—a particular concern when it comes to First Nations peoples. They urge researchers to work in “speaking back to placeless power” (p. 24) by appropriately recognising spaces, places, and people. In terms of understanding place, Green and Reid remind us in Chapter 3 that “rural place is produced – it is *practised* rural social space” (p. 44), as is any social space which requires agency from those involved. They argue that a serious consideration of the many facets of social space is needed to rectify the power imbalances harming marginalised communities. Their application of their model of rural social space to the field of teacher education highlights the need for teachers (or any profession) to understand the richness of their space's demography, geography, and economy over time. This requires agency and further theorisations of practice as applied in context to improve educational outcomes. Simone White in Chapter 4 builds on the role and implications of teacher education programs focusing on getting preservice teachers ‘community ready’. She contends that, while well intentioned, a simplistic or inadequate approach in teacher education programs can be potentially harmful to diverse, marginalised places—places that may be unfamiliar to preservice teachers. Her proposed solution is to include more socio-spatial theory in teacher education courses such as a place-conscious approach, ‘funds of knowledge’, and ‘thirdspace’ which would benefit teachers’ preparation for the multitude of contexts they will face in their professional lives. White's argument that in order for a place to be “reflected” (p. 57) in a classroom, the teacher must experience and see it, is echoed and expanded on by Jayne Downey in Chapter 5. Her assertion of the need “to *know* a rural place to do good work in a rural place” (p. 73) is fundamental not just for new rural teachers and researchers, but for anyone entering any place to work or live. The context is important. Coming to know the context and appreciate it is time-intensive, but her Rural Community Walks model provides a workable, flexible framework for beginning such vital work. Collectively, these chapters call for greater attention to be paid to the theories and conceptualisations of place. The power and hierarchical implications of under-theorised (or all together ignored) notions of place and space in education research have the potential to hinder teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. As an education researcher, it is ethical to know the context of your research (see the

further discussion below), just as it is ethical for teachers to know their context of, and so, their students.

Methodological Considerations

In this edition, multiple chapters have explored possible advancements in methodological considerations from the use of conceptual frameworks (Chapters 6 and 15), to research approaches (Chapter 13), data analysis (Chapter 8), and the intricacies and challenges of conducting ethical place-conscious projects (Chapters 17 and 18). The examples provided in this volume present insights into improved methodological choices across the research process. Dennis Beach and Elisabet Öhrn, both predominantly urban researchers, discuss in Chapter 6 the benefits they found in applying space-conscious conceptual frameworks such as those developed in rural education research. In their recent projects, they saw firsthand the inhibiting influence of the power dynamics (such as those explored in Chapter 3) inherent in existing paradigms and how these dynamics have limited their analysis and perception of educational issues. They argue now that space-conscious frameworks are needed to explore the space economics in both rural and urban areas in terms of social justice since social structures and class are not limited to a single socio-spatial setting. Similarly, in Chapter 13, Pam Bartholomaeus explores the benefits to urban and rural researchers of adapting a previously primarily urban-applied methodology to a rural-based research project. She explains how Linguistic Landscape methodologies were adapted to study a rural place and how she was able to analyse the various manifestations of power within the community. Overall, she advocates the necessity of understanding place in a nuanced way in order to push back against the trend of placeless learning where educational outcomes are standardised across national and even international goals. The importance of understanding place to promote a strengths-based approach to educational outcomes and research design was also stressed by Kilpatrick, Woodroffe, Katersky Barnes, and Arnott in Chapter 15. Their social capital research approach relies on building trust and relationships to ensure “a culture of working WITH rather than IN or ON the community” (p. 227). They contend that this approach recognises the unique set of resources available in every community and is particularly powerful in addressing and mediating the difference in socio-cultural perceptions between researchers and contexts. Roberts, Thier, and Beach in Chapter 8 assert that context matters in quantitative data as well. Through case studies in Australia and the USA, they detail how the standard statistical classifications of ‘rural’ erase the success of and homogenise rural places, thereby doing them harm. The recognition of the uniqueness of places and a strength-based approach to research enhances the quality of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, which in turn should better inform policy creation and highlight the achievements of students and educators appropriately.

Continuing the thread of the necessity of understanding the space where research is conducted, Jo-Anne Reid explores this fundamental element of research as an ethical

responsibility in Chapter 17. She also highlights that understanding place is deeply connected to understanding the local politics and power imbalances—particularly the historical and relational aspects between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. She argues that the considerations of space and place be embedded in all stages of the research process and, we would add, this is important regardless of the geographic location of the research. The ethical responsibilities of understanding place were further teased out in Chapter 18 by Downes, Marsh, Roberts, Reid, Fuqua, and Guenther who used their firsthand experiences as researchers to reinforce this necessity. Their examples demonstrate the need for place-conscious theoretical lenses when conducting research in order to fully explore the effects of each place's demographics, geographies, economies, and relationships on the phenomena under study. As such, they argue for the criticality of using such lenses to ensure researchers work *with* not *about* Indigenous peoples and cultures. Collectively, they too warn that research that is not sensitive to its particular people and place is at risk of harming the very people and places they aim to help.

Disciplines in Education

One of the main goals of this edition was to make explicit intersections of research that have been conducted under the banner of *rural* to other disciplines of educational research. Indeed, the focus of the various disciplines within education research occurs in rural places. There are, for example, gender inequities, literacy teachers, inclusive classrooms, school leaders, and complex issues around educational choices in rural places—just as there are in urban places. What researchers have learned about these disciplines in their rural projects bring great insights and exciting possibilities for advancements in education research. Again, the repeated message is clear: *context matters*.

The contributing authors of this volume have provided compelling examples of how their discipline 'looks' and is approached in rural contexts, then make critical arguments about how the findings of their research can benefit their disciplines as a whole. Sherilyn Lennon in Chapter 14, unpacks illustrations of gender performances in a rural community through a lens of merged poststructuralism and posthumanism theory. She argues that this more nuanced and contextualised approach to understanding gender beliefs should inform educators' pedagogies and might improve understandings of power relations created by heteropatriarchal practices, disrupting them for the better. In another example of practice from a rural context, Robyn Henderson in Chapter 11 reminds us that "the study of place can provide detailed information about the experiences and traditions that students bring to school" (p. 171) and so good pedagogy necessitates an understanding of place. Further, she contends that educational challenges, such as improving literacy teaching and learning, are complex and without a single solution—these are the same sorts of challenges rural education research has been grappling with for years, so the flexibility and recognition of diversity of place and people as reflected in this field of

research is invaluable to others. Julie Dillon-Wallace reinforces the need to consider the specific needs of cohorts of students as they relate to place in her discussion of inclusive education in rural contexts in Chapter 12. She contends that the frameworks involved in researching rural education, including what inclusive education looks like in practice in rural places, highlight the diversity and creativity needed to improve the quality of education and student outcomes. In Chapter 9, Melyssa Fuqua argues that understanding the context of a school is a tenet of both effective pathways advising and good school leadership, two of the more public-facing roles in schools. Furthermore, she posits that, given the fundamental need for educators to understand the place of a school, it should be recognised as part of their professional knowledge. Many of the contributing authors have highlighted the core principle of knowing one's place in order to know one's students—so how can we as educators and researchers better recognise and value this type of professional knowledge?

Schooling Choices

Another topical area of focus in education and education research is around school choice. While this has traditionally been a topic of interest in urban areas, several authors in this book have provided examples from rural contexts about different types of choices (or in some cases, lack of choices) and explore how these might inform choice in urban contexts. In Chapter 7, Eppley, Maselli, and Schafft examine the impacts of charter schools and policies concerning consolidations and closings on rural communities, noting the strong links between changes in policies and social changes in communities. The charter schools in their study were not used as “weaponized neoliberal school reform”, but rather “were born out of necessity” (p. 102) when the local school was closed. So, the choice was not, as is so often reflected in the urban-based discourse, ‘which is the better school for our children’ but ‘do we want a local school for our children’. Their study highlighted the importance to the town of having a school that understood and reflected its context in order to best meet the needs of their children. Guenther and Osborne in Chapter 10, also look at the choices facing families when it comes to schooling, focusing on the ethics of boarding school policies, particularly when those boarding schools are markedly different socio-culturally to the home context of students. Their questions about the effectiveness and potential for harm to students in the lack of critical assessment of boarding school policies, are also, fundamentally and philosophically about the importance of education and educators reflecting the context of students. This sits counter to the common belief that marginalised students can be ‘rescued’ from their circumstances by attending boarding schools. The need to do more than just counter deficit discourse around marginalised groups of people was also at the heart of Pollard, Skene, and Venville’s argument in Chapter 16. They posit that the diverse cohort of remote students who chose to undertake tertiary education needs to be recognised as such by their institutions. In gaining a better understanding of the challenges facing their remote students, institutions can also improve their

understanding of other cohorts. This too requires a process of coming to know the place of students in order to provide better educational experiences and outcomes.

Future Research Directions

In rounding out this chapter, and volume as a whole, we move now to suggesting some thought-lines that researchers may wish to follow in re-envisioning rural education research. Furthermore, we propose this project of rethinking the disciplines of education from the rural, and explicitly and meaningfully engaging with the rural from the disciplines of education, as an ongoing project. In this we position rural education research as that conducted in/with/about the rural in partnership with rural communities and informed by a rich understanding of rurality.

There are a number of areas of education research that collectively we may wish to consider in this re-envisioning. In addition to more engagement with the disciplines of education described by Furlong and Lawn (2010)—sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, economics, comparative and international education, and geography—we propose the need for further exploration of the following, which is by no means an exhaustive list:

- *Curriculum Inquiry* and its focus on knowledge in/for/of the rural, the relevance of curriculum knowledge, access and achievement in rural schools, and the inclusion of rural knowledges in the curriculum.
- *Diversity* is an area where the intersection of the rural with other areas of need is beginning to receive much needed attention. Issues here range from the pragmatics of equitable access to services through to consideration of the rural as a context of diversity and inclusion itself, especially given the dominance of metropolitan norms.
- *Ethics* (as begun in Chapters 17 and 18 here) needs further unpacking of issues such as those of inclusion, recognition, symbolic violence upon the rural, the reinforcement deficit discourses, and the use of rural as an easy hook for opportunistic researchers.
- *Policy Studies*—with a focus on metro-normativity in policy, access and achievement, post-secondary pathways, community economic development, agriculture development, and specifics such as staffing incentives and related school resourcing decisions—remains under-researched as it relates to and affects the rural.
- *Research Methods* should perhaps be a focus area themselves, especially tensions between research from a rural standpoint informed by rural methodologies, and those that merely subsume the rural with broader studies. It would seem that place-sensitive statistical studies are needed, along with place-sensitive studies and studies that engage with the contested nature of rurality. This would build on the work of White and Corbett (2014).

- *Social Justice* concerns motivate much education research, especially where a form of inequity or injustice is perceived to exist. The rural provides an engaging site for thinking about perspectives on, and approaches to, social justice as it exists at the intersection of education as a value system in and of itself, and differential achievement produced through this value system. Furthermore, the rural is an intersection of many traditional approaches to exploring social justice, including race, class, gender, *Indigeneity*—as well as occupying its own position as an area of special attention. How these concerns intersect in different ruralities is a powerful space for further research.
- *Youth* including youth futures, opportunities, and the ways in which youth experience contemporary rurality—is a growing area of youth studies. This provides rural education researchers another established area of research with an interest in the rural with which to engage.

Closing Thoughts

In this chapter, we have started to provide some lines of thought for re-envisioning rural education research. We invite education researchers to take one, many, or all of these lines of thought to continue the project we have outlined here to broaden rural education research. Such a broadening, a rurling, can include researchers with a focus on the rural taking up new lines of inquiry or drawing on new theories from the disciplines of education. That, however, is only one half of the project; the second half is to take rural education research to the disciplines of education in order to change the way those disciplines, and researchers, construct the rural. Rurling of education research requires persistent and simultaneous work on both these fronts, as rural education research is not only that undertaken in/with/for rural communities, it is all education research.

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