

Chapter 4

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



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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 comradeship 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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