



TIME TO CHANGE THE PARADIGMS?

**RETHINKING RURAL, REGIONAL AND
REMOTE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA**

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STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION

Take Away Messages

Belief and Position

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Rurality

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TAKE AWAY AND **DO** SOMETHING MESSAGES

Australia's sustainability is inextricably linked to the vitality of its rural communities and contexts

Education is a key player in generating and nurturing the vitality of rural communities and contexts

Education in rural Australia is a rich resource, in partnership with education in urban Australia, for driving sustainability

High quality education in rural Australia is good for *everyone*

BELIEF

Vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to the long term sustainability of any nation, and especially those in the developed world like Australia, where most people live in cities and environs. It is generally acknowledged that rural communities in Australia(McSwan, 2003) and world wide are experiencing fundamental changes socially, politically, environmentally and economically through loss of population, the impacts of globalisation and the harvesting of natural resources (frequently unsustainably) to feed growth.

POSITION STATEMENT

Education in Australia outside the capitals and very large regional cities since before Federation has been characterised by a number of **problematic issues**, which are essentially driven and sustained by particular understandings of rurality and remoteness.

ISSUES

The problematic issues include:

views about what kinds of education are needed and ‘good’ for rural students; curriculum breadth and depth; choice

gender, achievement, retention

attraction and retention of staff

distance, population and population density

viability and cost per unit of outcome

school size and school type

post school options


RURALITY

Essentially there are **instrumental/quantitative definitions of rural and definitions of a more nuanced and qualitative kind**. These have also been referred to as the geographical approach and the sociological approach (University of Ballarat, n.d.; Whitaker 1983; Mulley 1999; Hooper 2001).


Quantitative definitions of 'rural' place emphasis on population size and distance from large centres where there is an extensive range of human services available.

Qualitative definitions on the other hand, while recognising that population size and distance are contributing elements to what constitutes 'rural', focus on the cultural and relational dimensions of places and people.

Stereotypes and myths about the Australian bush and bush characters have a long history and continue to have some hold on understandings about rurality. For example, *The Advertiser* newspaper (Devlin, 2006), in a feature article to commemorate the Black Tuesday bushfires on Eyre Peninsula in 2005, used the banner headline “*Bush spirit shines amid tears, pain*”. Kapferer (1990) cited in Hooper (2001, p.2) lists “egalitarianism, independence, physical endurance, doggedness, taciturnity, loyalty, resistance to oppression, fortitude and perhaps a naïve faith in humanity” amongst the commonly held stereotypical images of rural people.

A decorative graphic consisting of a horizontal line with a gradient from light green to white. On the left side, there is a large black bracket '['. On the right side, there is a large yellow bracket ']'.

Cruickshank *et al* (n.d., p.4) suggest that ideas and assumptions like these “have social consequences”. As well, “ideas about rurality are just that and not objective truths (which) ... opens up the possibility of doing things differently”. Further, Cruickshank *et al* (n.d., p.4) argue that “rurality’ is ...not something given, but a social construction: its existence and the meaning that is put to it is dependent on its producers”.



**“Rural schooling, and how it was established, unquestionably reflected the bush myth. It was a romanticized and sanitized version of schooling which ignored much of the harsh reality of everyday country living. In the rush to canonize the essential goodness of the ‘bush’ character little attention was paid to developing an educational policy which truly reflected the complex social practice that defined people’s lives”.
(Kyle, 1990,p.43)**

DEMOGRAPHY

A particularly striking aspect of the changes taking place in rural Australia, as well as many other developed and developing countries, is **the decline in the number of youth** who remain in rural communities beyond school leaving age. Added to this is often a **gender imbalance** where young females leave rural areas at a higher rate than young males.



Salt(2005) argues, “it is the **loss of youth** and the partial replacement of that demographic by older people that is of most concern ...(because) the structural shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of (its) vitality...”(p.68).



YOUTH

Youth are fundamentally future oriented and as such, are a critical human resource for radicalizing and energizing rural Australia through education.

So, how to put this resource to work taking into account the historical, current and possible future contexts in rural Australia?

FACING SOME FACTS

With declining proportions of state and national populations, **many rural and regional areas of western countries in relation to essential human services like education and health, are struggling to remain viable** in the face of rising costs per unit of services required and the pervasive impacts of globalisation on rural economies, amongst the most visible of which is a steep decline in the demand for traditional labour.

“Globalisation and the power differentials it creates have had a significant social and economic impact on rural and remote areas... (m)ajor cities have benefited from the focus on the knowledge-based production that global capitalism demands, drawing in capital, people and resources” (Alston & Kent, 2003, p.5).


SUSTAINABILITY

There are many people living and working in rural areas who actually **want to be there.**

There are other powerful reasons as well for focussing on ways to revitalise rural communities in addition to meeting the 'I want to be there' one which can be summarised in one word- **sustainability.**


Perhaps the *most powerful* reason is that most of the **food** that is consumed daily in the world, and particularly in the developed world, is produced in rural areas.

“Without food, we are clearly nothing. It is not a lifestyle or add-on fashion statement. The choices we make about food affect both us, intrinsically, and nature, extrinsically. In effect, we eat the view and consume the landscape. Nature is amended and reshaped through our connections- both for good and bad” (Pretty, 2002, p.11).



Secondly, much of the world's **energy** is sourced from rural and remote regions and much of the world's **fresh water supplies** have their headwaters in rural locations and traverse substantial rural landscapes, which entails varying degrees of human intervention and management.

Thirdly, there is the profoundly important matter of **arresting the decline of the natural environment** and developing new paradigms of valuing it so that it in turn, can do what it has always done- sustain life in all its complexity and diversity. "...an intimate connection to nature is both a basic right and a basic necessity...we have shaped nature, and it has shaped us, and we are an emergent property of this relationship. We cannot simply act as if we are separate. If we do so, we simply recreate the wasteland inside of ourselves" (Pretty, 2002, pp. 10-11).




***Fourthly*, there is the ever present and stark reality of **global population growth** which will see by conservative estimates, an additional 3 to 3.5 billion people added to the existing 6.5 billion by the year 2050.**

This increase will impact in potentially catastrophic ways on each of the issues outlined and especially food which is already a major problem for nearly a billion people in developing countries. Even in the United States, “the largest producer and exporter of food in the world, 11 million people are food insecure and hungry, and a further 23 million are hovering close to the edge of hunger...” (Pretty, 2002 ,p. 5).

Towards a new rural education paradigm

Historically, schools and rural schools in particular, have played a crucial role in building individual and community capacities.


While for many years there has been a relentless focus on maintaining the economic viability of rural schools through consolidations and closures, those which remain open provide a unique opportunity, in partnership with urban schools, to progress a new approach to rural education *and* sustainability.



In rural communities, schools are often the largest organization in a town or area, frequently touch the lives of everyone and contribute significantly to the local economy.


They often employ the most people in the area, many of whom are tertiary educated. They are rich in terms of facilities like libraries, meeting rooms, sports areas, workshops and classrooms- spaces and places for community to become and to be community.

Because of the population decline that characterizes many rural schools, often there is underutilized space available and also some capacity in existing class arrangements to accommodate additional numbers with minimal consequences for those currently enrolled.




While there are few guarantees about anything to do with long term population projections and sustainability, what is becoming increasingly clear is that no one agency of government, no one community, no one private sector enterprise can function effectively for any sustained period of time without linking with others. **Interdependence and independence are integral to building new bases for sustainability.**

There are a number of features of the current arrangements and circumstances of country education that are very significant for the development of an approach that places greater policy emphasis on broadening the availability of it to students who do not live locally.



Firstly, **there are many instances of outstanding educational performance in rural contexts.** This is especially the case where rural schools and communities have worked very closely together to expand options and drive up standards as strategies to retain existing enrolments and attract new ones into a district. The many instances of sustained high performance provide the basis for challenging a widely held view that ‘the only way to get a good education is to leave town’.

Secondly, **many rural schools have developed specialized curriculum pathways of a vocational kind like aquaculture, agriculture, tourism and hospitality and environmental management as well as the traditional academic ones, which are highly valued by students, community and employers.** They are making a very significant contribution towards renewing the knowledge and skills required for Australia’s primary industries to be internationally competitive, and most importantly, ensure that the nation can continue to feed itself.



Thirdly, it is often the case that new specializations as outlined, have **capacity to take on extra enrolments at very little extra cost.** The economics of operating a bus applies- the cost of the driver has to be met regardless of how many passengers are carried. In some instances, a few extra enrolments can actually increase viability not only in terms of efficient resource use, but also in terms of improvements to the learning environment.

Fourthly, **rural education has embraced ICT and Australia is a world leader in distance education.** There is a rich and long experience to draw upon here to propel further advances in using ICT to enhance pedagogy and learning.

Finally, in most rural and remote communities there is **a very strong desire for community survival and with this a real openness to working in new ways with new partners.**

Progressing a new rural education paradigm


At the heart of progressing new approaches to rural education are rural-urban schools partnerships which give practical expression to the view that it makes economic, social, cultural and political **'good sense' to improve the utilization rate of *all* of the nation's schooling infrastructure** i.e. urban *and* rural.

Linked with this is a values position which states that it is also economic, social, cultural and political **'good sense' to have opportunities readily available for youth to access their school level education in *rural*, as well as urban, contexts.**



To translate these positions into action requires significant policy and operational work. The **Country Areas Program (CAP)** which has been running for over 25 years in Australia (together with the points made to date), is instructive in relation to what needs to be done.

So too is the **MCEETYA National Framework for Rural and Remote Education** and especially the “Essential Enablers” which are “*Personal, Relevant Curriculum, ICT, Multimode Delivery, Environment and Resourcing*.” (Essential) Enablers are the fundamentals for ensuring the provision of quality education educational opportunities in country locations and for country communities”(2001, pp7-8).



In addition to the **framing contributions** for a new a city and rural partnership approach to education from CAP and the National Framework for Rural and Remote Education, **consultations** with states, territories and key stakeholders to translate the ideas outlined in this paper into practice would also be required.

Education and training acquired in a country location needs to be accepted as having equivalent merit to that gained from a city context so that its potential to contribute as a full partner in the new approach being advocated can be

Funding needs to be available for the approach to facilitate movement and provisioning of students and in some cases, teachers and other carers.



Given the central role and place of schools in most rural and remote areas, **a greater focus on city to country initiatives provides a vehicle for engaging other service providers** like health and transport as well as the private sector, in a process of developing better integration of policy and programs that could add momentum to the approach to educational provisioning being advocated.

In addition to the matters outlined above, there are others that will require debate and decisions like **which age range(s) should participate, how will timetables and releases be determined and coordinated, and how will the care and custodial aspects of exchanges be managed.** Matters such as these can be resolved because there is a **huge wealth of relevant expertise and experience available** to facilitate the formation and implementation of new rural- urban schooling partnerships nationally.

Conclusion

More of the same thinking (and service provisioning such as education) will not “help us get out of the current crisis (of assuring Australia’s sustainability)” (Pretty, 2002, p.176).

It is time to consider something bold that brings together people who are basically by definition futures oriented- youth- to chart a new way forward.

A rural and urban partnership- presents a unique opportunity to change the deficit paradigm that characterizes much of the thinking about rural education and also make a major contribution towards Australia’s sustainability.

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