

## RURAL-URBAN SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND AUSTRALIA'S SUSTAINABILITY

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### PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new approach to sustainability using a rural- urban school partnerships model of education provision. Due to factors outlined in the paper, many rural schools have resources- built, human and curriculum- which are often under-utilized and which are consequently driving them ever nearer to closure, fundamentally because the cost per unit of service as determined by metro- centric modelling, is considered to be uneconomic. In contrast to this, many urban schools have to deal with capacity enrolments and are demanding extra resources to meet their obligations. These contexts plus the urgent need to do far more than is currently being done to ensure Australia *has a future*, is the basis for the new approach. Essentially, it involves significantly increasing the number of youth who spend a substantial amount of their time acquiring an education in rural areas, and in turn using this experience to contribute to their own development and sustainability.

### INTRODUCTION

Vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to the long term sustainability of any nation, and especially those in the developed world 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.

The continuous emptying of rural places with the consequent running down of services linked to the apparently endless processes of consolidation to generate economies of scale and efficiencies(whose efficiencies?), directly impacts on a country's capacity to survive. As Diamond(2005) states, "even the richest, technologically most advanced societies today face growing environmental and economic problems that should not be underestimated"(p.2). And, "either we solve the problems (within the next few decades), or the problems will undermine not just (countries like) Somalia but also First World societies" (p.7).

Individuals, communities and nations can exercise substantial choice over what happens to them when space and contexts are created for ideas to emerge and given opportunity to flourish. "Transformations must occur in the way we all think (and act) if there are to be real and (eventually) large- scale transformations..." (Pretty, 2002, p.169) that will progress new, sustainable and sustaining ways of habitation and living.

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. Youth are fundamentally future oriented and as such, are a critical human resource for re- building and re-energising rural Australia. Salt(2005) asserts, “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).

Schools and youth are inextricably linked. This paper considers a new role and place for rural schools and rural education in terms of the future sustainability of our nation through developing rural- urban school partnerships, predominantly focussed on the secondary years and senior secondary in particular. Essentially this would involve providing ways and means for city based students- youth- to access and experience country schools and communities as an integral component of their total program. City based schools in the main are where the largest enrolments are; rural schools and communities are in the main experiencing population drift and decline and under-utilization of resources. Bringing the two sets of factors and contexts together seems to be a basis for addressing some fundamental “survival issues” which are presented in this paper.

Before proceeding: a caveat. It is acknowledged that there are currently many instances of city students visiting and experiencing education and living in small rural communities. This paper is not intended to either dismiss the significance of these or to suggest in some way that they are not valued. Rather its purpose is to signal that it is timely for Australia as a whole to commence a major transformation in its total school based educational delivery platform that utilises and gives greater prominence to rural contexts and rural education in partnership with “the cities”.

The paper essentially comprises three related sections. The first explores in some detail various ways of considering and defining rural because it is both important and relevant to arguing for a major headset change about “ rural” to have some understanding about its complexity, diversity and problematic dimensions. In other words, rural is more than “urban’s opposite”. The second section presents key reasons for radically re-assessing the fundamental importance of rural contexts for sustainable futures, and section three outlines a new rural-urban schools partnerships approach to progress significant enhancement of the priority and place of rural contexts and Australia’s future.

#### **WHERE IS RURAL? WHAT IS RURAL? WHO IS RURAL?**

In Australia there are a number of terms that are commonly used to denote locations and associated characteristics that are considered to be other than metropolitan. These include country, regional, the bush, outback, remote and isolated. There are also terms of a more vernacular kind such as “the back of beyond” and “the sticks” that are used. Naming of other than metropolitan locations also occurs in many other countries and especially those with very large land masses like Africa and the United States of America, or those which are smaller in spatial terms but have contrasting landforms such as Britain.

In addition, there is a long tradition of scholarly work on “rural” in the field of social philosophy as represented by reference to *gemeinschaft* and *geschallscraft*. Traditionally rural is associated with *gemeinschaft* because of its emphasis on individuals finding identity within the group and *geschallscraft* is associated more with modern emerging urban contexts. Hooper (2000) asserts that “traditional *gemeinschaft* society was seen as the place of moral and social values whereas

geschallschaft was seen as the place where these values and morals had broken down” (p 1).

Basically, there are instrumental/quantitative definitions of rural and those 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). The former places emphasis on population size and distance from large centres where there is an extensive range of human services available. The latter, while recognising that population size and distance are contributing elements to what constitutes “rural”, focus very significantly on the cultural and relational dimensions of places and people.

Mulley (1999) has documented wide variation in the definitions of rural and rurality from one country to another. “At one extreme, Switzerland regards communities of 10,000 inhabitants or less as being rural, whereas in Norway communities of 200 inhabitants are defined as the rural limit” (p1). Staying with the instrumental/quantitative approach to defining rural, some countries also factor in population density per given area and economic activity as components of their definition linked with population.

Griffith (1996, p5) argues that “the descriptors, rural and remote, have been shown to be so generic and so imprecisely defined that they are relatively useless terms”. This has led him to undertake extensive research to develop a services( such as education) access score which is derived from “the population of the urban centre or locality containing the school, the distance from the school locality to the most likely accessed service centre, and the economic resources of the school population” (Jones, 2000, p8).

Hugo (n.d.) also argues that there is much confusion about the classification of the 37.3% of the population of Australia living outside of cities of greater than 100,000. He states that a significant amount of this “confusion regarding rural, remote and regional stems from an attempt to combine into a single classification two distinctly different conceptual elements: urban/rural and, accessibility/remoteness” (p 1). Because these are very different concepts, Hugo believes that “any attempt to classify non-metropolitan into rural and remote areas is misplaced... and that we need to classify areas in terms of their urbanness/ruralness and we also need to classify them by their degree of remoteness”(p 2).

In terms of education, rural and remote area determinations for government schooling provision in Australia are primarily based upon a blend of size of population centre and distance from either the capital city or a major regional centre (Jones 2000, pp12-17). For Northern Territory education services, “country consists of the whole Territory except for areas within a 75km radius of Darwin and Alice Springs, the two urban centres with a population of 20,000 persons or more” (Jones 2000, p17). By way of contrasting another systemic approach to defining rural, for South Australian government schools, eligibility for funding through the Rural Index commences when schools are located more than 80 kms from Adelaide and for non-government schools, a rural locality allocation applies to schools more than 50kms from the Adelaide General Post Office (Jones 2000, p15).

In comparison to the geographical approach to delineating “rural” with its focus on size, distance and access to services, the sociological or qualitative approach pays attention to essences of places and spaces in order to gain an understanding of rural and rurality. Put another way, “ the notions of movement, flow from place to place, the ways in which places are connected by histories rather than geographies, and the idea put forward by Deleuze that place is an issue of becoming and

identification, all constitute interesting problematics for (an) analysis (and understanding) of rural..."(McConaghy, 2002 p14).

Emphasising place opens up options for incorporating what Mulley (1999) calls the vernacular (referred to earlier), for shaping conceptions of rurality. In her paper, she cites Paul Cloke who in 1977 did pioneering work in comparative urban- rural distinctions. By 1994, Cloke had repudiated his rurality index continuum and moved to an approach that focuses on "people's experience of the rural" (Mulley 1999, p3). This dramatic shift Mulley argues, may be "the key" (to understanding rurality), because "while academics struggle to precisely define the rural, most people have a general conception of what constitutes 'rural' in their mind's eye". Further, "the incorporation of lay or vernacular ideas in a definition of rurality is supported by the theoretical basis of the study of popular culture, and is supported by post-modern theory in its focus on the local and the inclusion of a multiplicity of voices" ( Mulley 1999, p3).

Stereotypes and myths about the Australian bush and bush characters, as an instance of the vernacular, have a long history and continue to have some hold on understandings about rurality. The Advertiser (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) lists "egalitarianism, independence, physical endurance, doggedness, taciturnity, loyalty, resistance to oppression, fortitude and perhaps a naïve faith in humanity" (p. 2) amongst the commonly held stereotypical images of rural people. Of relevance here, Cruickshank et al (n.d. p. 4) highlight that ideas and assumptions like those named immediately prior, in terms of discourse analysis, "have social consequences". As well, "ideas about rurality are just that and not objective truths (which) ... opens up the possibility of doing things differently" (p4). And, " 'rurality' is ...not something given, but a social construction: its existence and the meaning that is put to it is dependent on its producers" (Cruickshank et al, n.d. p4).

In summary, it can be seen that determining what is rural and what isn't, is not as straight forward as it first may appear. Definitions, understandings and experiences of what, who and where constitutes rural vary widely and it can be argued that "rural"- and a number of other locational signifiers like regional, remote and isolated- is very much a matter of individual interpretation and a set of relativity judgements. However, notwithstanding this observation, from the perspective of advancing non- deficit ways of thinking about rural contexts especially in relation to education, it is necessary to have some appreciation of the diversity of meaning attributed to rural, albeit with some caveats, to progress discussions and the framing of new policies and practices.

#### **SOME RURAL CONTEXTUAL OBSERVATIONS**

The impacts of the economic and social changes occurring in many of the world's developing nations frequently displace traditional land- owners which often puts them on a rapid journey into poverty, because a key mainstay and wellspring of their identity-control over how they relate with the natural environment and nature- is largely denied them.

In western world contexts such as Australia, Canada and the United States, the impacts are sometimes not quite so dramatic but nevertheless frequently result in a rapid depletion of the requirements for a viable community like employment, and effective and affordable human services such as education and health. This is particularly the case for rural areas which have experienced a steady population decline for over a century when compared to the rise of cities and large regional centres, referred to by Salt(2005) as "sponge cities (because they) are soaking up the population of the surrounding bush"(p.64). And, as already briefly stated, the impacts of this have frequently hit hardest on youth (Salt, 2004, pp.63-81) who

have traditionally been a key factor in ensuring a rural town and its community “has a future”.

Today, 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).

In contrast with what at a first read may seem like a picture of gloom and doom, there are many people living and working in rural areas who actually *want* to be there. As briefly mentioned earlier, these include significant numbers of original inhabitants who, in many instances are desperately trying to retain, and in some instances reclaim, their cultures and their former land. 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.

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. Producing food, while in many instances it has “gone the way of high tech”, still requires enormous numbers of highly skilled and semi-skilled workers. Unlike mining, agriculture and horticulture- even with the advent of agri- business- is not as conducive to a fly in /fly out model of labour supply as it is. “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-URBAN APPROACH TO SCHOOL LEVEL EDUCATION**

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 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.

As well, in many rural communities schools are strategically positioned to be a rallying agency when the town feels under pressure, providing a sense of connection to the past, with the present and to the future. As well, schools have very pronounced cultures that can make change problematic, likely to be contested and requiring deep and sustained levels of engagement to produce movement from the status quo.

Initiating and then sustaining a change process is generally very demanding. This is especially the case when there are policies, practices and conventions derived from generations of doing things in a particular way and with a prevailing belief of “if only people did as we have always done, things would be better” shaping much of the thinking and action about the future. However, 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. 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. For example, an enterprise team based approach to aquaculture can be assisted by having a significant number of students to debate and trial alternative ways of growing high quality market ready produce. The same can be said for courses that have an extensive field experience component like agriculture or construction industries- sufficient students to simulate actual work place conditions is a major factor in the delivery of the intended learning experiences and outcomes. For other areas of the curriculum like history, English, mathematics and the sciences, an increase from a few students to 10 or 12 can also increase the range of available approaches to teaching and learning.

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.

In addition to the above points there are two other fundamental nation building/nation sustaining pragmatics that are integral to why progressing a fresh approach to country- city education partnerships needs to be considered.

The first of these is the contribution made by all forms of primary production- the vast majority of which is located in rural and remote Australia- to the nation's GDP and balance of payments. And, to reiterate, the fundamental importance of primary production in relation to the nation being able to feed itself must always be maintained and acknowledged as a top priority of governments. The recent focus on world security issues, energy and the world population growth to 2050, reinforce this "national non-negotiable".

Secondly, there is the matter of the essence of Australia's character and culture. Suffice to assert here that a majority of Australians would likely agree that "country" is an indispensable component of the complex mix of elements that work to help form and enrich the nation's identity and, therefore it is essential that a vibrant rural sector be maintained and be accessible to young people in particular.

#### **PROGRESSING NEW RURAL- URBAN SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

At the heart of progressing a new rural- urban schools partnerships approach to education, especially at the post compulsory years, is a values position which acknowledges that it is 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*. Enablers are the fundamentals for ensuring the provision of quality education educational opportunities in country locations and for country communities" (2001, pp7-8).

In essence the CAP program provides additional funding- currently approximately \$117 million over 4 years (DEST, 2006)- to schools in rural areas to augment and enrich learning. Frequently the extra money is used by schools and communities to access learning experiences that are outside of their locality either by traveling, bringing in specialist expertise or purchasing additional teaching resources. CAP is highly valued by rural communities for what it aims to do and achieves. It is firmly embedded in the dynamics of rural school operations and life and it is also firmly embedded in the dynamics of rural politics.

The Country Areas Program is recognition that some impetus and resourcing for schools in geographically isolated contexts is required for them to move beyond their immediate locale for learning support and enrichment. In addition, the CAP program is intended to be complementary to other sources of funding, enhance system responsibilities in the application of technology to teaching and learning, and can be used for teacher professional development and the evaluation and documentation of best practice (DEST website).

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 will also be required. The following brief statements are intended to indicate the focus of them.

Firstly, 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 realized. It will be counterproductive to achieving the changes being advocated if either of the partners is considered to be the junior member. One way to avoid this occurring is to recognize that partnership approaches to change “are in most cases complex but (also) dynamic in the sense that they evolve and change as they move through successive phases of diagnosis, planning and implementation... (and) there is a balance to be struck between the motivating activities of mutual encouragement, recognition and celebration and the essential disciplines of challenge, critique and evaluation...” (Woolhouse, 1999, pp, 96-97). And, “the chief characteristic of partnership is common effort towards common goals” (Seeley, 1981, p.65).

Secondly, funding needs to be available for the approach to facilitate movement and provisioning of students and in some cases, teachers and other carers. This is largely the brief of the existing CAP program so augmentation of current funding, possibly under existing legislation and state and territory agreements, would appear to be worth exploring rather than creating a new program and associated bureaucracy.

Thirdly, individual students currently attract resources- principally funding- into schools and then decisions are made by systems and at a local level, about the best way to gain maximum outcomes from the inputs. In other words, there are existing resources for education which opens the possibility of different decisions being made about how to use them, consistent with the proposed approach.

Fourthly, 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.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Rural contexts are integral to the sustainability of Australia as an advanced developed country. This is because rural contexts produce or contain most of the nation's food, energy, water, and natural life essential environments, in addition to contributing to the cultural dimensions of the country. Schools have historically played a critically important role in developing and maintaining the vitality of rural communities and contexts. In recent years with major changes taking place in rural demographics, especially the decline in the number of youth who see a future for themselves in rural places, plus the impacts of globalization, pressure has mounted to make the provisioning of rural education viable. This in turn has led to programs of school amalgamation and consolidation as well as closures. In some instances these have produced very innovative approaches to maintaining access to education for local communities. There have also been many instances where the closure of a school or a major change in the kind of local options available has precipitated the death of a town or community.

This paper has attempted to argue that developing new partnership approaches to the provision of education by utilizing the combined resources of rural and urban schools and principally students, with the enrolment flow being predominantly from urban into rural contexts, creates the potential to make a major contribution to Australia's sustainability. This is a real possibility because of the aggregated impacts of having many thousands of young people who, unless provided with a structured opportunity to take some or all of their education in a rural context, would most likely never consider doing so, and therefore would probably limit their framing of life opportunities to urban or near urban contexts.

“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 for sustainability. And schooling- *rural and urban* in partnership- presents a unique opportunity to pursue the goal.

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