

## AUSTRALIAN RURAL EDUCATION RESEARCH: A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Barbara Pini**

*Griffith University*

**Robyn Mayes**

*Queensland University of Technology*

### ABSTRACT

This paper brings a rural geographical lens to the study of education and rurality. Two key interrelated notions underpinning Australian educational scholarship on rurality are explored. That is, the concepts of the rural and of community. The adoption and mobilisation of these terms in a large proportion of rural educational research as unproblematic is at odds with contemporary theorising in rural geography. In order to advance studies of rural education, we point to the contestability, fluidity and fundamentally political nature of these core concepts. In doing so, we draw on a selection of extant geographical research and educational research concerned with the rural. In concluding the paper we highlight that as well as challenging orthodoxies in relation to notions of rurality and community, more recent rural geographical scholarship has also engaged a greater diversity of methodological approaches. We suggest that more robust and nuanced approaches to terms such as ‘the rural’ and ‘the community’ in educational research could be garnered by reference to this dynamic body of methodological writing.

**Key words:** rurality, community, rural geography, rural geographic scholarship

### INTRODUCTION

We come to the study of rural education as geographers. Our interest in the rural has been long-standing with research on gender, sexuality, cultural work, mining, class relations, memory, heritage, corporate social responsibility, global production networks (e.g. Bryant & Pini, 2011; Gorman-Murray, Pini, & Bryant, 2013; Mayes, McDonald, & Pini, 2014; Mayes & Pini, 2014; Pini & Leach, 2011; Pini, Mayes, & Boyer 2013). More recently, our interest has turned to exploring the interconnections between identities, space and power in rural education (Pini, Carrington, & Adie, 2015; Pini & Mills, 2013; Pini, Molestone, & Mills, 2014; Pini, Price, & McDonald, 2010). In seeking to map the production of education, space and society in our sub-disciplinary field of rural geography, we have drawn on the literature of colleagues working in areas such political, urban, social and cultural geographies (e.g. Hanson Thiem, 2009; Holloway, Hubbard, Joens, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2010; Kraftl, 2013; Nairn & Higgins, 2011). We have turned, as well, to the literature on the subject produced by scholars working in the discipline of education. In doing so, we have noted the lack of dialogue between rural geography and studies of rural education. The types of debates that have been germane to the field of rural geography in recent decades have been largely overlooked by scholars of rural education in Australia. In this light, our aim in this paper is

to initiate a conversation with colleagues working outside of geography but concerned with rural education. We do so by reference to two of the most commonly utilised notions in studies of rural education and indeed, rural geography. These are rurality and community. We highlight the ways in which these terms have often been deployed in Australian studies of rural education as well as identify the limitations of this deployment by reference to the rural geographic literature.

### DESTABILISING RURALITY IN RURAL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Australian scholars of education outside of the urban utilise a range of descriptors to refer to their work. These include *remote* (Lock, Budgen, & Lunay 2012a, p. 65), *bush* (Miller, Graham, & Al-Awiwe, 2014, p. 91), *regional* (Major, Wilkinson, Langat, & Santoro, 2013, p. 95) and *rural* (O'Neill, 2013, p. 61). Seldom do writers problematize these terms, recognising the distinctive socio-cultural norms, assumptions and discourses which inflect various notions of the rural and, by virtue of when, where and how they are mobilised, shape educational experiences. Relatedly, they do not invite critiques of how values, behaviours, practices and identities are influenced by varied understandings of rurality, and moreover, the power relations embedded in these understandings. While Robinson (2012, p. 79) notes that meanings of rurality differ, her interest is not in exploring these differences as articulated and experienced by educational actors, but in cautioning against the 'careless' use of terminology such as rural, regional and remote. What is suggested by such a claim, of course, is that rurality is 'out there'. What is rural can be known, identified and catalogued provided we engage the appropriate nomenclature.

In overlooking the *slippery* nature of rurality (Connell & Dufty-Jones, 2014, p. 18), educational writers rely on common sense definitions and understandings of the term. Most often what is taken for granted is that the rural is distinct from the urban. As such difference is used as a premise for much educational scholarship (e.g., Bartholomaeus, 2013, p. 101; Clary, Feez, Garvey, & Partidge, 2015, p. 24). Such difference is asserted rather than explored or questioned. The 'rural student' who is constituted in such research is distinguished from their urban counterpart but not differentiated according to other aspects of their social location, such as in relation to gender, sexuality, class, disability or ethnicity. Instead, the identity marker 'rural' is given primacy and universalised.

This type of functionalist understanding of rurality as a known and fixed geographical entity, tied to population size, distance from urban centres and/or economic activity which dominates educational research in Australia was once also common in rural geography (Bryant & Pini, 2011). This, however, is no longer the case. Shifting ideas about 'rurality' in the sub-discipline have been largely associated with what has been referred to as a 'cultural turn' in the sub-discipline (Morris & Evans, 2004). While the idea of a 'cultural turn' has become an established part of the conventional narrative charting rural geography's history as Holloway and Kneafsey (2004, p. 1) remark, we are aware that the story of rural geography is undoubtedly more complicated and contested than is suggested by linear and categorical tales of development. However, a review of the literature does highlight that, from the early 1990s, previously dominant structuralist and materialist concerns and conceptual paradigms were challenged by those who, influenced by poststructural theorising, argued for a focus on representation, language, multiplicity, difference (e.g. Milbourne, 1997; Murdoch & Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1992). The turn to culture in the sub-discipline heralded a range of exciting new developments perhaps one of the most significant was the unsettling of orthodoxies around the notion of rurality itself. Challenged was the idea of rurality as a fixed, singular and unchanging entity with writers instead recognising it as socially constructed, fluid, fractured and multiple. As Mormont (1990) wrote, rurality is a *category of thought*(p. 40). In recognition that people may have numerous and potentially conflicting experiences of the rural, and in light of postmodern concerns with marginality and diversity, academics began exploring how rurality is refracted through the prism of other social locations such as class, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity and youth (e.g., Bryant & Pini, 2009; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Leyshon, 2008).

While it first emerged three decades ago, the question of ‘what is the rural’ continues amongst geographers today. Indeed, many would claim that such a question has become more urgent and pressing as a result of what are referred to as the ‘end of rural’ or ‘death of the rural’ arguments (Bell, Lloyd, & Vatovec, 2010, p. 209). Such arguments are connected to a wide range of demographic, social, cultural, political and economic changes so that, for example, rural places are increasingly less distinct from urban places and the majority of the world’s population now lives in cities. Australian rural spaces have not escaped transformation. Imperatives such as trade liberalisation, environmental challenges, the contraction of government services, the ageing of the population and the out-migration of rural youth (e.g. Garnett & Lewis, 2007; Gray & Lawrence, 2001) have radically altered rural spaces. The sea and tree change phenomena and gentrification have further altered rural places, bringing not only population increases, but also shifting the social, economic and cultural dynamic of affected communities (Burnley & Murphy, 2004; Curry, Koczberski, & Selwood, 2001). Today, Australian geographers talk of a ‘multifunctional’ (Holmes, 2012) and ‘postproductivist’ rural (Wilson, 2004) as a means of signalling that agriculture can no longer simply be conflated with rurality, and that while rural spaces may continue to be places of production, they are also places of consumption and protection.

There is considerable scope for bringing the complex debates about the meanings of rurality to bear on the study of education. Identifying and critiquing inequalities and injustices in education require not only a focus on the material rural but also the representational rural. It matters little, as Halfacree (1993) reflected some decades ago, that the proliferation of diverse representations of rural space means imaginings of the ‘rural’ are becoming increasingly detached from the ‘reality’ of rural geographical space. As debates continue about whether or not rurality continues to ‘exist’ in the twenty-first century, we were fascinated in a recent study on education in the rural to find that ideologically charged definitions and assumptions about rurality continue to hold currency in contemporary Australia. In work examining the documentary series *Outback Kids*, which focused on a boot camp for at-risk youth in rural Australia, we revealed how dominant discourses of the rural as simultaneously therapeutic and disciplining pervade the programme (Mills & Pini, 2015; Pini & Mills, 2013). In this respect, the rural is positioned as having unique and efficacious pedagogic possibilities which, in turn, provide a rationale for sending youth far away from their homes to participate in a highly questionable regime. Of course, the configuration of the rural as having a pedagogic role to play in the lives of youth has deep historical resonances (e.g. Gruffudd, 1996). What is critical here is that these continue to echo in the present.

### **DESTABILISING COMMUNITY IN RURAL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

The trope of rurality is deeply intertwined with the second notion we wish to explore in this paper, that is, ‘community’ (Woods, 2011). Further, as with the term rurality, that of community has been and continues to be engaged in discourse around non-urban education. In taking up this argument in relation to the United States, Corbett (2014) has recently drawn attention to community as a *deeply problematic concept* (p. 603). This, however, is seldom recognised in the Australian literature on rural education where community is rarely subject to theoretical scrutiny. At the same time, Australian rural education research is replete with claims regarding the centrality of local communities which have a number of roles. They are positioned, for example, as resources in supporting teacher development (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013) and as entities to be understood, taken into account and ‘joined’ (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006) and as sites for collaboration (Lynch, 2013).

A central discourse underpinning the role of rural communities is that of the knowable and singular community. For example, Lock and colleagues (2012a), in their study of novice principals in rural schools, assume a singular community with which principals can (and should) have a relationship. As part of the paper’s closing advice it is suggested that principals of rural schools need to understand *how community [in general] works, while ensuring the school is in tune with*

[the specific] community concerns and aspirations (Lock et al., 2012a, p. 75). As part of this, outgoing principals should update essential information about the school and its community (Lock et al., 2012a, p. 75). This suggests that firstly communities are unproblematically knowable (by outside experts) and secondly are qualitatively different from urban communities. This difference is made clear in claims that rural communities are ‘monocultural and conservative’ (Major et al., 2013) without caveats concerning the (assumed) homogeneity, and thus generalisability, of rural communities. This research thus participates in what could be described as the stereotyping of ‘rural communities.’ In addition, while communities are argued in the literature to be important to all schools, rural communities are represented as particularly important: *The nature and extent of relationships between parents, community members, and a school are likely to be highlighted in a rural context* (Clark et al., 2006, p. 77). Furthermore, such collaboration is uncritically presented as ‘mutually beneficial’ (Lock et al., 2012a). Cumulatively, normative understanding of rural communities as more demanding, as qualitatively different from urban communities, is produced and reproduced in Australian writing on rural education.

What appears to be pervasive in Australian scholarship on rural schooling is examining the rural community from the perspective of education staff and students (e.g., Lock et al., 2012a; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). In doing so, the literature privileges the outsider gaze, with the implicitly present ‘urban’ as the norm. Illustrative is the claim by White, Lock, Hastings Cooper and Reid (2011) that rural communities that are ‘healthy’ are integral to ‘successful rural schools.’ Here rural communities are evaluated against white, middle-class and urban norms and values. These norms and values are powerful in that they are unstated and taken as hegemonic. In literature which adopts this ‘othering’ perspective, the rural community, school and students are reproduced as a personal ‘challenge’ for teachers. This becomes most pernicious and damaging in reference to Indigenous Australians. For example, drawing on interviews with 23 teachers in remote Western Australia Lock, Budgen, Lunay, and Oakley (2012b) report, but fail to critique, that teachers in their sample want to work with Indigenous children in order to *make a difference* and because of the *enjoyment of taking up a challenge* (p. 131).

Overall, there is a clear and persistent tendency in the rural education literature to take for granted the presence of an homogenous, readily-identifiable, pre-existing and singular community with which to engage or within which to situate education. Importantly, as Liepins (2000) has observed in relation to late 1990s work in the rural geographies discipline, though community features as context and/or site and/or ‘partner’ for rural education, it remains undefined, in turn a profound signifier of its ‘taken-for-granted’ or common-sense status. In contrast, there is a substantial body of rural geographical work that has demonstrated the notion and practice of ‘community’ is far from straight-forward. Working within rural geography, Ruth Liepins (2000) has argued convincingly for a *detailed reappraisal of the concept of community* (p. 23) in order to address a number of key challenges in rural studies (see also Panelli & Welsh, 2005). Not surprisingly, these are similar to issues and challenges central to research on rurality and education as noted above, namely: power, diversity, spatiality, identity.

In reappraising ‘community’, Liepins (2000) outlines four approaches and their limitations. These too have significant overlaps with the deployment of and approaches to community in the rural education research, and are thus summarised here. Indeed, the extant Australian educational research tends to exemplify a range of these variously interrelated approaches. Firstly, Liepins (2000) identifies the structural-functionalist notion of community as *a term signifying a particular social arrangement, one generally fixed in terms of both the form and function it would take* (p. 25). She then identifies an ethnographic approach which also positions community as *a relatively fixed object which could and would be found and described ethnographically* (p. 25). As Liepins (2000) notes, both approaches face insurmountable and widely critiqued problems around the attribution of *either functions or authenticity to the concept of ‘community’* (p. 25). This and other concerns resulted in a shift away from ‘community’ in favour of ‘place’ as analytical category. The third and fourth approaches are those which in a minimalist fashion use ‘community’ to implicitly signal *particular parameters or categorisations of research scale and social ‘plurality’*, along with a

concurrent symbolic constructionist approach which foregrounds meanings of 'community' (p. 25). In the latter, community is understood as a symbolic or subjective construct as opposed to a structural or external entity. Significantly, as Liepins (2000) points out, a focus on meanings enables attention to the ways such meanings are not only socially created/shared but are also contested: this enables attention to differential experiences of community. Importantly this is elided in the reviewed educational scholarship. These fundamentally selective approaches, however, are also beset with important limitations and flaws such as the minimisation of material and physical dimensions.

Liepins then turns to a wider body of works concerned with the theorisation of 'community,' drawing forth the ways these enable engagement with 'community' as a multiplicity of meanings, as heterogeneous and plural, as site of contestation around hegemonic understandings of (rural) identity and place, as fluid, contingent and shifting. Indeed, a key insight in contemporary theoretical work is that community is an unstable outcome of a number of complex processes both social and political (Joseph, 2002). In contrast to understandings of community as 'out-there' and identifiable, in these approaches community is a *call* or an *appeal* (Singer, 1991, p. 125). Thus, as we have argued elsewhere (Mayes et al., 2014), the very identification of 'a community' is part of the process of constructing community. Further, as Massey's (2005) highly-influential work has made very clear, the relationships between community and place are multiple, complex, historical and formed in dialogue with extra-local forces and processes, such as those attending mineral extraction in rural Australia. In short, a number of senses/experiences/constructions of community can coexist in single geographical location.

As Liepins (2000) argues, critical approaches enable a much needed reinvigoration of 'community' as both analytical category and, in this instance, educational site and practice. That is, a reinvigorated and critical conceptualisation enables *culturally nuanced and politically critical accounts of social connection in contemporary rural societies* (p. 32).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have detailed how the turn to culture in rural geography has opened up debates about the meanings of rurality and community that have enriched the sub-discipline and ensured a more nuanced and politicised understanding of spatial inequalities. The fact that such debates have failed to resonate in much of the Australian scholarship on rural education is not a marginal academic concern. How we think about, write about and talk about rural people and places matters. In adopting and circulating atheoretical notions of rurality and community, we homogenise and marginalise. We reproduce power differentials between the urban and the rural and within the rural.

An associated dimension of the cultural turn in rural geography has been a shift away from positivist methodologies with rural geographers not only embracing a broader repertoire of data collection tools but also engaging in critical reflection about the politics of knowledge production (Woods, 2012). These developments have much to offer rural educational scholars beginning to address methodological questions in their research (White & Corbett, 2014). Rural educational researchers, for example, may find television programmes, films, postcards, advertisements and poetry useful to better understand how meanings about rurality are circulated, reproduced and/or resisted in the context of schooling (e.g. Mayes, 2010; Phillips, Fish, & Agg, 2001). Alternatively, they could turn to fiction, oral history interviews, q-methodology, visual approaches and mobile methodologies as a means to produce a fuller understanding of the rural educational landscape (Fahmy & Pemberton, 2012; King & Church, 2013; Nairn & Panelli, 2009; Previte, Pini, & Haslam-McKenzie, 2007). As rural educational scholars embrace methodological plurality, they may further enrich knowledge about schooling outside the metropole by attending to the types of ruminations on power and positionality that underpin much contemporary rural geographic scholarship. Questions of how to subvert the power relations of traditional research processes (Pini, 2002), elucidate lay knowledges of rurality (Riley & Harvey,

2007), utilise one's own biography to contextualise rural investigations (Pini, 2004) and engage in reflexive rural research (Cairns, 2013; Gill & Maclean, 2002) have all been well detailed by rural geographers. In this respect, they have advanced the field, not just methodologically but epistemologically, particularly in relation to the terms 'rurality' and 'community'.

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### **Barbara Pini**

[b.pini@griffith.edu.au](mailto:b.pini@griffith.edu.au)

Barbara Pini is a professor in the School of Humanities at Griffith University. She has a long term interest in rural studies particularly in relation to how rurality intersects with other locations to create inclusions and exclusions. Her most recent work is focused on rural romance fiction.

### **Robyn Mayes**

[robyn.mayes@qut.edu.au](mailto:robyn.mayes@qut.edu.au)

Robyn Mayes is a Vice Chancellor’s Senior Research Fellow in the Queensland University of Technology Business School. She has a long-standing research interest in rurality which she has examined in dialogue with creativity, communities and resource extraction and, most recently, transnational labour migration. She has published this research in an edited book, over 20 journal articles and numerous book chapters and reports.