

FROM PARADISE TO BEYOND: GEOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTS AND HOW THEY SHAPE EDUCATION IN THE BUSH

John Guenther

Flinders University and Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation

John Halsey

Flinders University

Sam Osborne

University of South Australia and Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation

ABSTRACT

Schools in Australia are sometimes described, categorised and defined by their locations. These statistical geographical categorisations help to determine how funding is allocated. They help to determine the types of teachers that are recruited, what kinds of teachers are attracted, how much they are paid. Geographical categories can create perceptions that sometimes end up as stereotypes in the minds of parents and students. At times remote geographical locations are associated with disadvantage. These kinds of categorisations tend to treat schools in binary terms, or on a linear continuum, which may also be associated with value judgements that can be misleading. For example, rural schools are often thought of as disadvantaged, while city schools are therefore advantaged. In this paper the authors argue that the categorisations described above are unhelpful, limiting, misrepresent and are often unwarranted. In this paper they draw from the descriptions offered by schools for the public that are presented on the My School website. They draw a line that starts in the Adelaide suburb of Paradise and runs through to the far north of South Australia. Along the line there is a mix of metropolitan, provincial and remote schools. In analysing this data from My School, they challenge the binaries and continuums associated with geographical labels and propose instead, based on geographical concepts associated with space and place, that schools could be better described in terms of socio-cultural and geographic diversity.

Key words: geographical categorisation, geographical labels, socio-cultural diversity, geographic diversity

INTRODUCTION

Schools in Australia are sometimes described, categorised and defined by the geography in which they are located. Geography is a broad discipline that intersects with others including economics, demography and education. In many cases these categorisations we refer to in this paper, are driven by the needs of statistical geographers who construct visual representations (maps) of location on the basis of social, economic, demographic and cultural data. In this paper we consider geography as it intersects with education, demography and statistics.

These categorisations—described as metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote (Jones, 2004)—together with a range of other components that contribute to a ‘funding formula’, are important for a number of reasons (Australian Government, 2013). They determine how funding is allocated. They determine the types of teachers that are recruited, what kinds of teachers are attracted, how much they are paid and sometimes the career trajectories of teachers. Perhaps more importantly they create perceptions that sometimes end up as stereotypes in the minds of parents and students. At times we associate more remote locations with disadvantage (Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2014).

We could categorise schools as either rural or non-rural, in order to convey a sense of context (e.g. city versus country). Alternatively, we could label schools on a continuum from metropolitan, to regional or provincial, to remote and very remote. The reason for providing these groupings could be to gain a sense of relative distance, isolation, access or even education service delivery cost. We could also use these categorisations for comparison purposes—perhaps to more equitably compare performance between schools.

One of the problems with these kinds of categorisations is that they tend to result in treatment of schools in binary terms, or perhaps on a linear continuum. In themselves, these binaries and continuums are not necessarily bad. But they tend to also be associated with value judgements that can be quite misleading. For example, rural and remote schools are often thought of as disadvantaged, while city schools are somehow therefore advantaged even though locations within metropolitan contexts vary considerably. For example, some suburbs may have a *stigma of place* associated with them (Baum & Palmer, 2002, p. 358). For some teachers, working in rural or remote schools may be seen as a career-limiting move because of the perceptions associated with these labels. Rural and remote students also, may feel the pressure to leave a rural school because city schools are perceived to give them more opportunities, or perhaps because of feelings of *personal dislocation* (Dorman, Kennedy, & Young, 2015, p. 26). Dorman et al. point to the different perceptions of teachers and community members in rural and remote Queensland schools. They found that community members’ perceptions were different than teachers. Therefore a sense of personal dislocation is not directly a product of place but rather a psychological response. This point is important for the discussion that follows because the measures of remoteness and locational advantage that we point to, are often generated from outside the place they refer to—they are not constructed from within.

In this paper, we examine the issue of space and place in a range of schools, starting arbitrarily (and perhaps ironically) in metropolitan Adelaide’s suburb of Paradise, and then progressing in a more or less straight line out of the metropolitan area of Adelaide northwest to the remote community of Indulkana in far north-west South Australia. The examination is based on publicly available data contained in the My School website (myschool.edu.au). Before we attend to the data, we consider some of the relevant literature related to geographical constructs of remoteness and theories of space.

LITERATURE

Geography of Education

While we as authors are not geographers, we invariably use or borrow from the discipline of geography. As teachers we have at times taught geography, but we are by no means experts in this specialised field. Both education and geography share multidisciplinary traditions where overlaps occur with other disciplines such as economics, anthropology, sociology, history and politics (Ahamer, 2012; Taylor, 2009). Taylor argues that geography contributes to education at a number of levels, from micro *embodied geographies* of the learner, through to the sites of learning in institutions, and on to the meso level of rural education and education markets, then to the macro level *globalisation of knowledge* (Taylor, 2009, p. 658). In terms of education markets, the relevance of geographies of education to rural and remote places is evident, where choices about *where* students go to learn are determined not only by demand but also supply of education and the social dynamics of a given community. In parts of rural and remote Australia where we have lived, perceptions about the desirability of one place over another determine to some extent where people live and therefore where children go to school. In remote communities too, the choices parents have to make about where their children go to secondary school are often determined by the absence of schools in the place they call home. The choices parents and young people make are more often than not, not made on the basis of *where* they think there is more advantage. The net result is what Corbett (2009) describes as *geographic disembedding* (p. 4). It is a phenomenon not restricted to Australia. It happens within other countries (Taylor, 2001) and across countries too (Waters, 2006). In summary, we would argue that geography does matter to education. However, it is not necessarily the physical or spatial location that matters as much as the perceptions that people have about the culture, economy and social opportunities that exist in the space.

Geographic Constructs of Rurality, Remoteness and Disadvantage

In Australia numerous terms are used to denote locations that are thought of as 'other than urban' including country, regional, the bush, outback, remote, and isolated. Descriptions of a more vernacular kind are also used such as 'the back of beyond' and 'the sticks'. Naming of non-urban locations also occurs in other countries and especially those with very large land masses, like Africa, Canada and the United States of America, or those which are smaller in area terms but have contrasting landforms, such as Britain. In addition, there is scholarly work on 'rural' in the field of social philosophy, as represented by reference to *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Hooper, 2001). Traditionally rural is associated with *gemeinschaft* because of its emphasis on individuals finding identity within the group, and *gesellschaft* is associated more with modern emerging urban contexts. As Macfarlane (2015) eloquently argues, the language we use for locations, *shape[s] our sense of place... for language does not just register experience, it produces it* (pp. 1 & 25).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Structure provides one spatially based structure that is used for statistical comparisons. It is a 'statistical geography', and as such it provides an applied quantitative lens through which to view measures of social, economic, educational or health related statistics (ABS, 2014). A quick look at the map below (Figure 1) shows how this structure represents Australia *in a particular way*. There is nothing in this Structure that on the surface suggests that disadvantage is related to location:

The Remoteness Structure of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) is used to disseminate a broad range of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) social and demographic statistics. It divides each state and territory into several regions on the basis of their relative access to services (ABS, 2011).

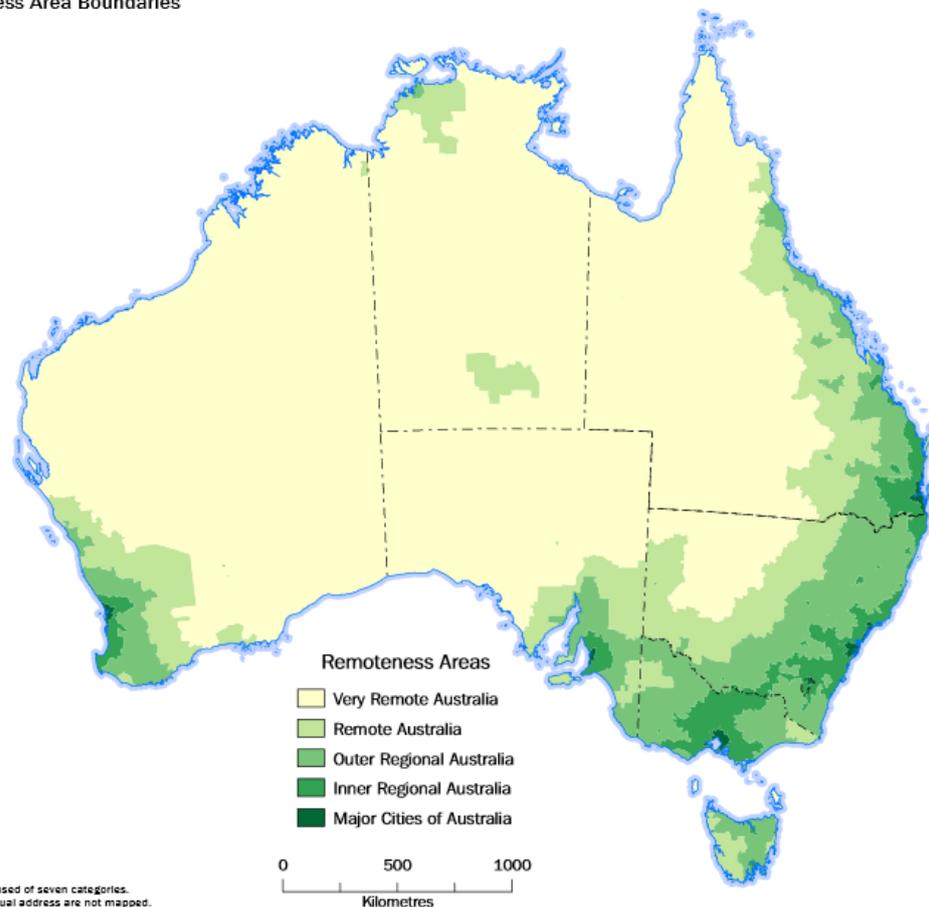
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However, when statistical information is mapped to these boundaries it creates a particular view of spatial regions across Australia. To a large extent it presents a view of Australia from the outside in, given that the large urban centres of Australia are distributed around the coast of Australia.



2011 Australian Statistical Geography Standard: Remoteness Structure

Remoteness Area Boundaries



Note: The Remoteness Structure is composed of seven categories. Migratory - Offshore - Shipping and No usual address are not mapped.
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Figure 1: ABS Remoteness Structure Map of Australia (ABS, 2011)

Other constructs assess remoteness in similar ways. One is the Accessibility/Remote Index of Australia (otherwise known as ARIA). Hugo, Champion, and Lattes (2003) argue that ARIA is a positive development as a response to rural-urban stereotypes. However, in Australia the problem with their argument for classifications based on settlement size, concentration and accessibility would not change the map much at all. This index categorises remoteness in terms of access to services on a scale from 0 to 12. The premise of this scale (which has since been adjusted to become ARIA+) is outlined in an occasional paper by the Department of Health and Aged Care in 2001:

In order to systematically tailor services to meet the needs of Australians living in regional Australia, 'remoteness' (identified with lack of accessibility to services regarded as normal in metropolitan areas) needs to be defined (DHAC, 2001).

On the surface this appears quite benign, as it seems reasonable to argue that more remote places have less access to services. The problem is that access, remoteness and disadvantage all go together when the measures of advantaged are constructed as they have been by the ABS and as they have in the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), as shown in Figure 2 below—even though the Principal Component Analysis of SEIFA does not include indicators of

remoteness. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (2000) explicated the complexities of this bundling together of apparently disparate elements which have such a powerful impact on life opportunities. Further, the Dropping off the Edge Report (Vinson, Rawsthorne, Beavis, & Ericson, 2015) found *In every [Australian] jurisdiction there is a marked degree of spatial concentration of disadvantage... [and] One common feature across the jurisdictions was the prominence of disadvantaged localities in rural areas...* (pp. 9 & 11). In the figure below there is not a lot of difference between the plots for Inner Regional, Outer Regional and Remote areas, but what stands out is that Major Cities have the highest level of socio-economic advantage and Very Remote areas have by far the lowest. This representation reinforces a view that localities in rural and particularly very remote locations, are inherently disadvantaged.

7.13 Distribution of IRSD SA1 scores by remoteness classification

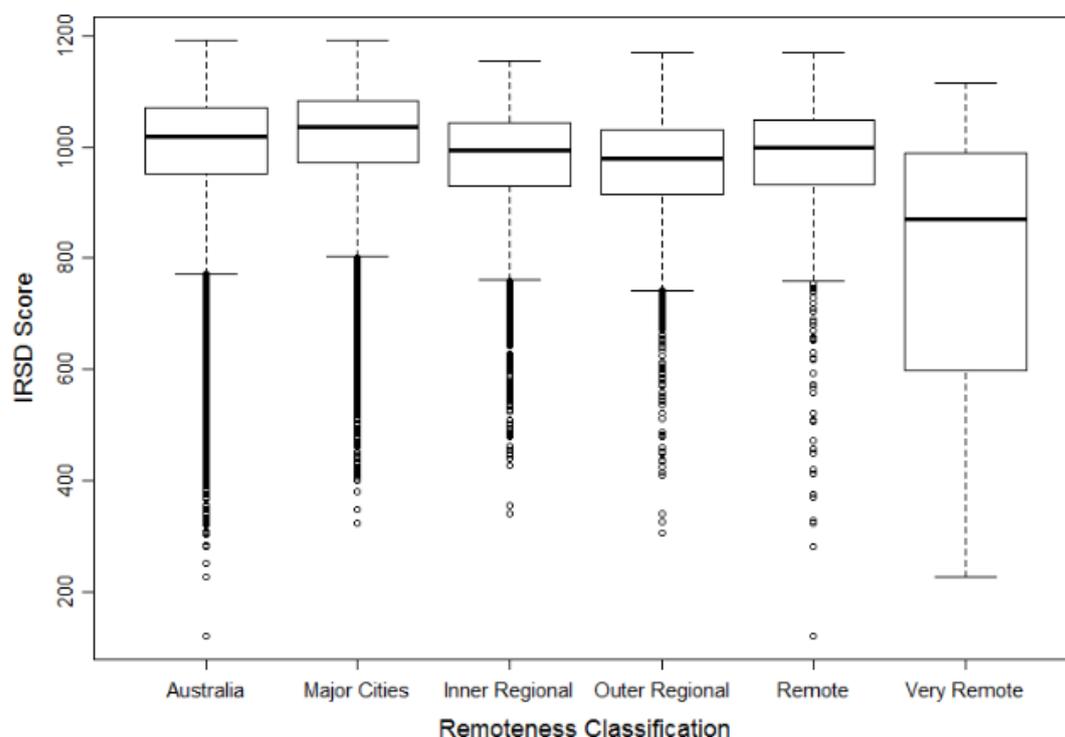


Figure 2: *Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (ABS, 2013, p. 68)*

In terms of components used to calculate the My School Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), the formula explicitly includes remoteness as an indicator of advantage such that

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

Note also that the measure also includes an indicator related to Indigeneity. This then means that by definition, Indigenous status and remoteness are included as indicators of *disadvantage*. The point is, that within an apparently objective measure of remoteness used to measure attributes of education we see values that directly label remoteness (or rurality) as the disadvantage. It is not then that a consequence of being remote is to be disadvantaged, it is that one is more or less directly related to the other.

Space, Place and Equity in Education

Green and Letts (2007) problematize the idea of educational space as being benign or neutral, and instead conceptualise it with its *challenges of power, difference, identity and disadvantage* (p. 57) in the context of equity. Following Soja (1996, 2010), they locate space within the *field of power and the social* (p. 64). Soja's understanding of 'firstspace', 'secondspace' and 'thirdspace' typologies is informative in that it contrasts the domination of the 'real' (firstspace) as a scientific and objective space with the creative or imagined (secondspace) and brings together a *real-and-imagined* (Soja, 1996, p. 11) space that is neither one nor the other but rather 'an-Other'. We would suggest here that the metrics of remote measurement generally lie in the first space. And like Soja (2010) we agree that the *'colonized construction of the colonized 'other' as subordinate and inferior beings are expressed poetically and politically in defined and regulated spaces'* (p. 36) which include classrooms among the many others that are similarly controlled. The level of space control is reflected in the terminology and rhetoric of 'closing the gap' where space between the colonizer and the colonized is seen as problematic because the colonized fails to meet the benchmarks and standards of the colonizer. Similarly in the case of the rural 'other' the deficits of those who live in that space are described, as discussed earlier, in terms of (less) access to the services of the metropolitan. The deficits are rarely conceptualised the other way around, except perhaps when second space imagining romanticises the 'bush' or 'traditional culture'.

What we will see in the data that follows are the respective accounts of metropolitan and non-metropolitan school representatives, who share with the public their views of space. We would contend that these public statements of 'what is important about my school' largely reflect the firstspace, primarily because the speakers are inculcated into the realities of the firstspace structures that colonize the geography of the school's location. The *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012) draws on the foundation of the Melbourne Declaration's (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) first goal: 'Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence'. However, in suggesting equity measures, it discusses equity in terms of Indigenous status, sex, language background, geographic location, socioeconomic background and disability and goes on to say:

... equity measures are not separately listed in the Schedule of Key Performance Measures but are derived, for reporting purposes, by disaggregating the measures for participation, achievement and attainment where it is possible and appropriate to do so (p. 6).

In other words, equity isn't measured. Instead, equity groups are measured as a proxy. In terms of remoteness, then, the ability of education to work with and for people who live in remote areas is ignored and those people who live in rural and remote locations are treated as a problem to be measured. This is particularly important for Indigenous people living in remote locations, where the local understandings of purpose and measures of success and aspiration are ignored in favour of largely metro-centric conceptions of success (e.g. reading, writing and spelling in English).

Characteristics of Rural and Remote Schools in Australia

In rural and remote communities, schools are often the largest organisation in a town or area and frequently touch the lives of everyone. They contribute significantly to the local economy and often employ the most people in the area, many of whom are tertiary-educated. Schools are rich in terms of facilities like libraries, meeting rooms, sports areas, workshops and classrooms, as physically and socially constructed spaces and places for *communities of location ... [and] communities of interest* (Black, 2005, pp. 20–21) to meet, interact and transact. The area and distance 'footprint' of a rural school is typically larger than that of an urban school and the signifiers of boundaries and clustering of activities—historical, social and commercial—also vary substantially (Halsey, 2013). An important subset of rural and remote schools are those that are

classified as ‘very remote’ and which have high proportions of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student populations. These schools are characterised by students who come with a rich diversity of languages and traditional Indigenous cultures. Many of these schools are one of the few sites in their communities where English is spoken at all (see Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2014).

METHOD

This paper takes an arbitrary geographic slice of South Australia as a way of considering rurality and remoteness from the perspective of schools. The slice starts (perhaps ironically) in Paradise, a suburb of metropolitan Adelaide and heads north-west on a line as the crow flies to the far north of the state in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, about 1000km from Paradise (see Figure 3).

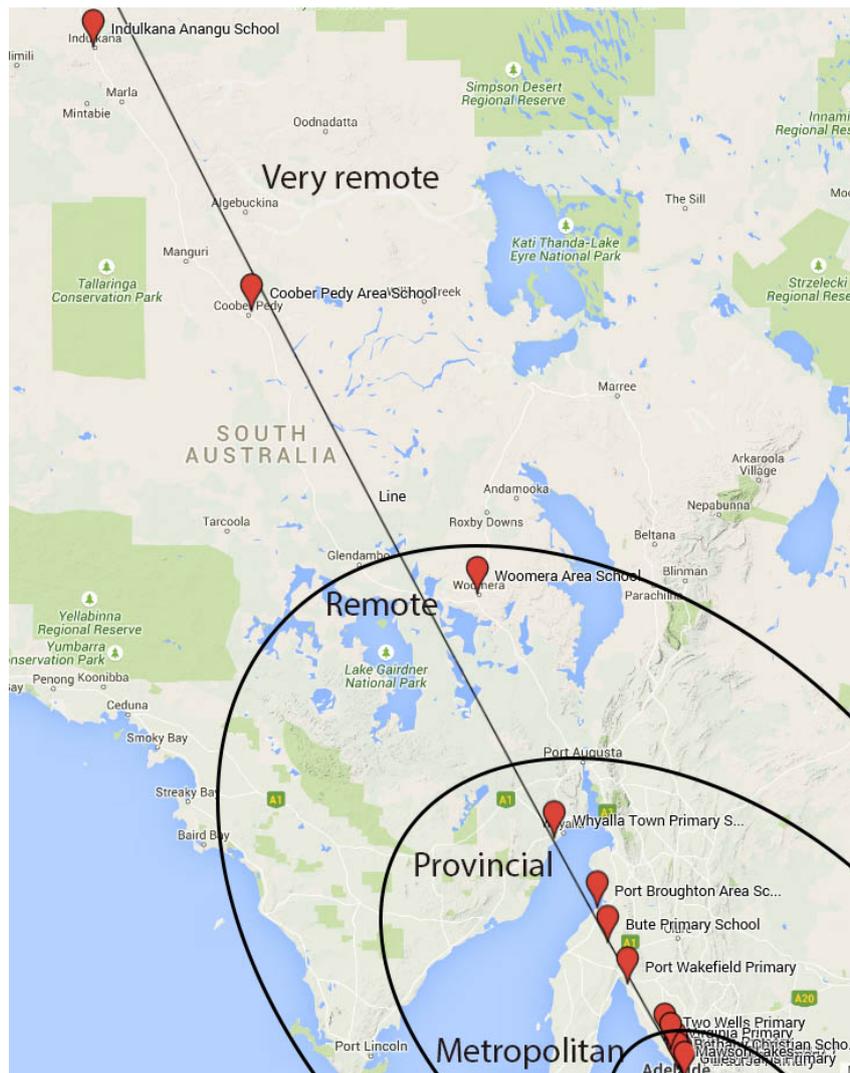


Figure 3: A Slice of South Australia: Paradise and Beyond

By definition according to MySchool (Jones, 2004) the line passes through metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote areas. As such, the geographical slice (which could equally be seen as a kind of radius emanating from a central point) is designed to represent an example of the geographical spread of schools in one state of Australia. Schools were selected that more or less sat on this arbitrary line through the geography. While there are probably more that could be included, we have chosen to examine 16 schools: eight metropolitan and eight non-metropolitan sites. We use the descriptions of metropolitan and non-metropolitan here, only for the sake of

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avoiding confusion, given that My School uses this classification to describe some schools that we would consider are not ‘rural’.

Information about the selected schools was obtained from the My School website. The schools and a selection of their 2014 characteristics are listed below in Table 1. Even a cursory examination of the table shows some differences that bear no apparent connection to the distance from Paradise. The schools have different numbers of enrolments, they have varying proportions of LBOTE students and varying levels of socio-economic advantage.

Table 1: List of Schools and Selected 2014 Characteristics obtained from My School

| School name | Remoteness categorisation | Approx. kms from Paradise | ICSEA | Enrolment | LBOTE (Language Background Other Than English) | Indigenous students |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-----------|--|---------------------|
| Paradise Primary | Metropolitan | 0 | 1022 | 198 | 10% | 2% |
| Gilles Plains Primary | Metropolitan | 3 | 886 | 94 | 22% | 30% |
| Ingle Farm Primary | Metropolitan | 5 | 955 | 386 | 62% | 6% |
| Mawson Lakes Primary | Metropolitan | 10 | 1070 | 698 | 31% | 1% |
| Parafield Gardens R-7 | Metropolitan | 12 | 963 | 536 | 41% | 4% |
| Bethany Christian School | Metropolitan | 12 | 980 | 523 | 66% | 2% |
| Burton Primary | Metropolitan | 15 | 945 | 416 | 17% | 3% |
| Virginia Primary | Metropolitan | 25 | 952 | 269 | 41% | 1% |
| Two Wells Primary | Provincial | 35 | 968 | 327 | 0% | 4% |
| Port Wakefield Primary | Provincial | 90 | 935 | 59 | 5% | 7% |
| Bute Primary | Provincial | 135 | 995 | 51 | 0% | 4% |
| Port Broughton Area | Provincial | 160 | 973 | 152 | 0% | 5% |
| Whyalla Town Primary | Provincial | 230 | 1025 | 339 | 3% | 2% |
| Woomera Area | Remote | 450 | 974 | 12 | 0% | 17% |
| Cooper Pedy Area | Very remote | 750 | 871 | 273 | 53% | 42% |
| Indulkana Anangu | Very remote | 1030 | 453* | 92 | 80% | 88% |

*2013 year

However, the purpose of this paper is not to closely analyse the numeric data shown in the table above. Rather, what we want to do is analyse the descriptors that are given by each of the schools to see how they define themselves using principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011).

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To do this we have taken the school profile information from the My School pages, placed each into an NVivo™ (qualitative analysis software) project and then coded each description according to themes that emerged from the descriptors. This process of interpretive discourse analysis (Gillen & Petersen, 2006) is of course subject to potential bias on the part of the researchers.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study with just sixteen schools examined from the perspectives of one person who represents the school, trying to put the school in a favourable light. However, we think that these descriptive statements are an attempt to define the schools in a way that shows to the public, what they think stands out about the school. We also acknowledge, that while the data are publicly available, an approach which engaged the schools in a deeper conversation about how staff, parents, community members and students perceive their schools, would yield richer data. Further, we acknowledge that what is not said in those descriptors could be very important for our interpretation, and we have not delved too deeply into what should be present that is not present, in the data.

FINDINGS

While this study is by no means exhaustive or representative of all schools in Australia it does allow us to catch a glimpse of how different types of schools see and describe themselves (albeit from the perspective of the person writing the My School description). Table 2 summarises the findings. Before we consider what is there it is perhaps most informative to see what is not evident from the data. The words 'isolated', 'disadvantaged' or 'remote' do not appear in any of the descriptions. The word 'rural' appears four times in sixteen sources, including in one metropolitan school which described the school as having a 'rural feel'.

In terms of the themes that emerged, we do see a number of distinctions between the metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools. Firstly we see non-metropolitan schools describing themselves more in terms of partnerships and parent or community involvement with schools. For example:

Parents and teachers share responsibility for the education of children; therefore Two Wells Primary School values parent participation.

They are also more likely to describe the community in which the school fits, in terms of its characteristics. For example:

Bute's main form of industry is farming where wheat and barley cereal crops are the primary produce.

Non-metropolitan schools were more likely to describe themselves in the context of their history. No metropolitan schools described themselves in this way. For example one school put it like this:

The school was established in a tin building in 1886 before being listed as a public school in 1894.

The other interesting descriptor that was not mentioned by metropolitan schools was about how students went to or came home from school. In Bute:

About a third of the students travel to school by school bus, with the other students either living locally or are driven in from the outskirts of the township by their parents.

And at Woomera:

Living in Woomera offers a unique opportunity for children to experience outback life in a community where they can walk themselves home from school, ride their bikes and visit friends who live nearby.

Table 2: Themes and Key Words found in School Descriptors

| Key themes | Metropolitan schools | Non-metropolitan schools |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Partnerships, parent and community involvement | 4 | 11 |
| Community characteristics | 3 | 7 |
| Curriculum priorities | 10 | 6 |
| Goal or aim of the school | 3 | 6 |
| School grounds and environment | 8 | 6 |
| Student wellbeing priorities | 7 | 6 |
| Extra-curricular | 3 | 5 |
| History of the school | 0 | 5 |
| Special programs | 11 | 5 |
| Values held and promoted by the school | 6 | 5 |
| Academic achievement focus | 2 | 4 |
| Motto or vision for the school | 4 | 4 |
| Staff characteristics and contribution | 3 | 4 |
| Cultural aspects of the school community | 7 | 3 |
| Enrolment information about the student population | 9 | 3 |
| Special features or characteristics of the school | 5 | 3 |
| Getting to and from school | 0 | 2 |
| Key words | | |
| 'Rural' | 1 | 3 |
| 'Isolated', 'disadvantaged', 'remote' | 0 | 0 |
| 'Diverse' or 'diversity' | 7 | 1 |
| 'Community' or 'communities' | 16 | 18 |

Metropolitan schools on the other hand were more likely to talk about their special programs and special features. For example at Burton:

Focussed support is provided to students with special needs and those from multi-cultural backgrounds, through additional staffing, small groups and smaller class sizes, and explicit teaching.

They were also more likely to offer information about their enrolments. At Ingle Farm for example:

Many Aboriginal families also choose our school.

And:

Many students are exempt from taking NAPLAN tests due to low English proficiency, and are included in the data as not meeting the national minimum benchmark.

Many of the schools in the metropolitan part of the slice have a high percentage of LBOTE students (see Table 1). This is reflected in the descriptions of cultural aspects of the schools. At Mawson Lakes for example:

We have students from over 42 nationalities and host several international students, making our school culturally rich and diverse.

This probably explains why they are also more likely to describe special programs. For example at Virginia, which has 41 per cent LBOTE students:

Specialist areas of learning are science, cultural studies, the arts, physical education, English language support, and first languages (Khmer, Italian, Greek, and Vietnamese.)

The array of special offerings is probably also explained by the larger enrolment numbers, which may make such programs more viable. The larger enrolment probably also explains the stronger focus on curriculum priorities. For example at Gilles Plains:

Literacy teaching and learning is a priority. Our balanced literacy program has a strong focus on orthography.

And meanwhile in Paradise:

All students study the language and culture of Italy.

But the data also shows some similarities in emphases. For example, similar numbers of schools described their mottos, vision statements, goals and values. There was also a similar focus on student wellbeing priorities, and many schools across the geographic slice described something that was important about their grounds and school environment.

DISCUSSION

So what can we learn from this imperfect and limited examination of sixteen schools in South Australia? The first thing that stands out is that none of the non-metropolitan schools saw themselves as disadvantaged, isolated, or remote. Most of the non-metropolitan schools did not even describe themselves as rural. This is important because those descriptors are often imposed on rural and remote schools as a given. And while it may be a fair call to argue a case for additional funding on the basis of remoteness, as the Education Australia Act 2013 demands, these terms are not the defining features of remote or rural schools.

What we do see in this limited dataset though, are some more nuanced differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools (in this sample at least). Firstly the focus on parent and community involvement stands out. This is consistent with findings from research on remote education conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, which found that remote education stakeholders saw this as a primary indicator of success (Guenther, 2015).

Another point of difference is the focus on history in non-metropolitan schools. This is probably worthy of further and broader examination. The historical connections of school to community are probably an intrinsic aspect of community life that in many cases shapes the identity of both school and community—a point that connects strongly with Soja's (2010) suggestion that *our spatiality, sociality and historicity are mutually constitutive* (p. 18). This theme only comes from non-metropolitan schools which may have something to do with the longer connection to place that these schools have than is typically the case for metropolitan schools.

The intertwined nature of school and community is also reflected in the frequent descriptions of the community's characteristics. Of note, too, even though it is a small part of the data, is mention in the data about how students get to school and home again. The notion of travelling some distance on a school bus or riding a bicycle home are noteworthy, indeed defining, elements of schooling in non-metropolitan schools. Transport has played, and continues to play, a vital role in rural and remote areas in relation to ensuring children can access education. Transport and associated infrastructure has also played a vital role in shaping the kind and levels of education available. As argued by Halsey (2013), in South Australia (and elsewhere):

The gradual improvements in rural road systems ... meant that the proposition of transporting students to a larger central school became preferable to providing small rural schools. Transporting students to a bigger school, particularly if the school was comparatively well equipped and well staffed, aided the policy of consolidation adopted by the South Australian Education Department as an administrative technique to assist in the development of area [combined primary and secondary] schools. Consolidation was a worthwhile policy from the perspective of the department because the cost of providing transport was less than the cost of staffing and maintaining small one-teacher rural schools. ... Consolidation and transportation were essentially two sides of the same coin – without adequate transport facilities for students, the consolidation of small schools could not be achieved (pp. 129 & 130).

It is also worth noting that the differences that mark metropolitan schools have little to do with urban geography (as opposed to rural geography)—there was a focus on the school environment and the social/cultural environment rather than on the sense of location within a particular suburb. For example, note the use of the key word 'diversity' in metropolitan schools in Table 2. By contrast, rural schools along the slice were particularly focused on the community environment and its characteristics.

Finally, the findings point to some common features of all schools that are worthy of promotion regardless of location. These include the importance of values, goals and visions that reflect the unique culture of the school community. Similarly aspects of the schools environment that make a school a great place for learning are worth celebrating regardless of location.

What might this all mean in terms of the metrics used to categorise schools based on geography? We suggest that there are a few points worth making. Firstly, this small analysis highlights points of difference which could be attributed to geography and distance. But these points of difference are not in any way necessarily described in terms of deficit or disadvantage. Difference does not mean disadvantage. Again, this resonates strongly with the findings of recent remote educational research, which showed that disadvantage is hardly ever used by people living in remote communities to describe remote education, despite being imposed on it (Guenther, 2015; Guenther, Bat & Osborne, 2014).

If community involvement and history are important to non-metropolitan schools (as this analysis suggests), then there are some strong implications for how we might approach a discussion about resourcing, managing and leading non-metropolitan schools. For example, whenever there is talk of rural school closures, it should come as no surprise that the community is likely to rally around its school, because they see it as an integral part of the community. Conversely, resourcing and leadership that honours the long-term commitment of community in schools will likely get a better response. If there are disadvantages associated with rural and remote schools, it is not to do with the schools themselves; rather, it has to do with the ongoing sustainability of rural and remote communities. In that case, the argument for classifications along geographic lines is built not on distance or isolation, but on the vulnerability of some rural and remote communities.

What we see in the analysis presented here, too, consistent with a more nuanced representation of demography and geography suggested by Hugo et al. (2003) is that many of the stereotypes of the rural-non-rural divide simply do not apply. That is, rural and remote schools are not, by definition, disadvantaged. While Hugo et al. argue for geographic and demographic characterisations, we would add to these social, historical (as per Soja, 1996) and in addition, cultural characterisations. The latter would be particularly important for recognition of the different ontological, epistemological and axiological frames of reference that drive at least to some extent, participation in education (Guenther, Milgate, O'Beirne, & Osborne, 2014).

Further the notion of a continuum of relative remoteness and therefore disadvantage is not reflected in the data examined here. For example apart from Indulkana, most of the ICSEA scores presented in Table 1 are in a fairly narrow range with average scores very similar for both metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools. The level of LBOTE diversity in the metropolitan schools ranging from 10 per cent to 66 per cent of the school population to some extent mirrors that in the non-metropolitan schools, where it ranges from 0 per cent to 80 per cent of the school population. Similarly, across the geography slice we see aspects of schooling that are quite consistent regardless of remoteness.

While we are conscious of the relationship between remoteness and NAPLAN scores, which are reported annually and which show a correlation between geolocation and average score (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014; Scullion, 2013), we have chosen not to examine this aspect of rural education (see for example Ainley & Rothman, 2010). This is not because the differences are not real, but because we know from our research that the fundamental purposes of education in rural and remote parts of Australia are somewhat different than they are in metropolitan parts of the country (Guenther, Milgate, O'Beirne & Osborne, 2014). Comparison on the basis of NAPLAN scores leads to the promulgation of false binaries that can only be validated if a metrocentric standpoint or position is adopted. The imposition of stereotypes can be offensive. Halsey (2014), drawing on the work of bell hooks argues:

The nature and the power of the place of marginality—as rural contexts and rural schools are often framed vis a vis urban/metropolitan—is, in essence transformed through the act of choosing rather than having it imposed. (p. 15)

It would be an incorrect reading of the above discussion to then infer that what we are suggesting is an abandonment of funding models that provide more resources to rural and remote schools. The simple fact is that it costs a lot more to deliver any service to communities that are more distant from 'Paradise' (which here stands for metropolitan centres more generally).

If we return to the theory of space and place discussed earlier, particularly drawing on Soja's thirdspace theories, it is apparent that the metrics of Table 1 reflect the perceived objective reality of the firstspace. By contrast, the brief outline of descriptors summarised in Table 2 offer something quite different, and in many cases they reflect a view of 'an-Other'. For example the focus on student wellbeing, partnerships and community involvement demonstrate a localised conception of what is at the same time real and idealised—not what is expressed as real in the My School data on student outcomes. Regardless, the data does not support a binary view of rural and metropolitan, even though there tends to be some differences. A Soja points out, the *geographies that we have produced will always have spatial injustices and distributional inequalities embedded within them* (Soja, 2010, pp. 72–73). However, what this analysis has shown is that while this may be true, it is possible to imagine spaces that have unique characteristics but which also share common human concerns—characteristics and concerns which fall outside the 'colonized' and power-laden conceptions of reality.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have drawn a line from Paradise to 1000km beyond, identified 16 schools that sit on that line and captured something of their character, based on what 16 people have written for the public domain, about what they think is important for their school. We have done this in order to test or challenge the idea that there is something of a continuum from metropolitan to remote, or that there is a binary of metropolitan and non-metropolitan. Drawing on Soja's conception of 'thirdspace', we see that while the descriptors of schools are undoubtedly influenced by positions that the authors of those descriptions have adopted, probably mostly as firstspace ideas of what is real and objective truth, there are some identifiable descriptors that point to 'an-Other' view of reality that is neither 'real' or 'romantic'.

While the real and objective characterisations of schools are evident to some extent, particularly in the numerical analysis of schools along the line from Paradise, there is no reason in this descriptive data to see Paradise as anything like paradise. This is despite the overarching measurement frameworks and geographic constructs that see rural and remote schools as somehow disadvantaged, deficient or failing. Those pervasive characterisations are at times a bit annoying for those of us (like the authors) who have lived and worked in these spaces, even though we are forced to use them to justify the level and type of resourcing required to ensure that rural and remote schools remain vibrant and sustainable places of learning.

What stands out, in place of a continuum or binary, is a rich diversity of experience that reflects the spaces, histories and socialities of the school communities along the line from an-Other 'paradise' to Paradise. While this limited study offers some insights about rural and remote schools and the role of statistical geography in shaping perceptions, it does beg for further and more detailed examination of the perspectives of a wider group of school stakeholders about what they think of their schools in relation to location.

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John Guenther

john.guenther@flinders.edu.au

John Guenther is the Principal Research Leader for the Remote Education Systems project with the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and Flinders University. John has worked as a researcher and evaluator in remote Australian contexts (particularly the Northern Territory) for the last 12 years on issues related to education, training, families and children, justice, child protection and domestic violence. His current role is focused on understanding how education systems can better respond to the needs of students and families living in very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Beyond this, the Remote Education Systems project is looking for innovative models of schooling, teaching and learning that improve livelihood opportunities for students from remote Communities.

John Halsey

john.halsey@flinders.edu.au

John is Professor of Rural Education and Communities at Flinders University and a consultant in rural education through the Center for Relational Learning in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His doctoral research focused on how principals of rural schools construct their roles, and pre-service country teaching placements in Australia. Prior to joining Flinders University, John was a teacher, a principal of two schools in South Australia- Ceduna Area School and The Heights School (both reception to year 12, one rural, one metropolitan), Associate Director of the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, an Executive Director in the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services and a Chief of Staff to a State Minister for Education and Children's Services. He has also worked in educational facilities, was a project officer with the Australian School's Commission Choice and Diversity in Education initiative and has been a Fulbright Scholar. John has also worked as the Executive Officer of the Rural Education Forum Australia. John's work and commitment to rural education and communities is framed and grounded by the challenge of vibrant, productive rural communities being integral to Australia's (and the world's) sustainability.

Sam Osborne

Sam.Osborne@nintione.com.au

Sam Osborne has worked in Aboriginal Education since 1995, including teaching of Aboriginal languages, remote teaching, and positions as Deputy Principal and Principal at Ernabella Anangu School. Since that time, he has worked on Principals Australia's Dare to Lead Project as the Central Australian consultant and a range of other work in corporation interpreting, consulting and research and evaluation teams. Since March 2012, he has worked as a Senior Research Fellow at UniSA within the CRC-REP Remote Education Systems project. He is studying for his PhD part time through VU (Victoria University) in Melbourne.