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## A CURRICULUM FOR WHOM? REREADING ‘IMPLEMENTING THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM IN RURAL, REGIONAL, REMOTE AND DISTANCE-EDUCATION SCHOOLS’ FROM A RURAL STANDPOINT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper builds upon the evolving methodological perspective of a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014b), and its related method of strategic eclecticism (Roberts & Green, 2013), to reanalyse existing data behind a previously published paper by Drummond, Halsey and van Breda (2012). It does this through an examination of the role of the rural in the Australian curriculum, drawing upon work that raises the lack of recognition of rurality in the curriculum as an important social justice issue (Roberts, 2014a; Roberts, 2015; Roberts & Downes, 2016). Through the reanalysis the paper illustrates that the rural educators who responded to the initial study had a concern for local places, and a perspective that an Australian Curriculum has the potential to marginalise local knowledges, and rural and remote schools more generally. Furthermore the re-analysis shows that age, time teaching in a rural or remote setting, distance from a major centre and jurisdiction of the school all influence respondents’ views in distinct ways. Consequently this paper illustrates the utility of re-analysing previous research reports, the use of a rural standpoint in research, and that rural educators have specific rural-related concerns regarding the Australian Curriculum that are largely unaddressed.

**Keywords:** rural standpoint, curriculum, rurality, knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper builds upon the evolving methodological perspective of a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014b), and its related method of strategic eclecticism (Roberts & Green, 2013), to reanalyse existing data behind a previously published paper by Drummond, Halsey and van Breda (2012). It does this through an examination of the role of the rural in the Australian curriculum, drawing upon work that raises the lack of recognition of rurality in the curriculum as an important social justice issue (Roberts, 2014a; Roberts, 2015; Roberts & Downes, 2016). This paper is therefore largely exploratory, in that it applies ideas developed elsewhere to an existing data set, to explore the utility of those ideas. As such, the approach and form of this paper is not that of a conventional academic paper. This is deliberate as the aim is to emphasise the process, rather than the product, of this analysis.

In this paper I adopt the perspective of a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014b): a perspective that rural people and communities really matter (Sher & Sher, 1994) and which recognises the value of knowledge produced in, for and with the rural (Roberts, 2014b). We do this because much existing research related to rural educational (dis)advantage is informed by an implicit

metropolitan norm (Roberts & Green, 2013), and informed by distributive perspectives (Rawls, 1999) on social justice. That is, it is 'spatially blind' (Green & Letts, 2007), and focused upon the distribution of resources to address some (assumed) lack of social or capital resource. This then is part of Cuervo's (2012; 2014) important work that seeks to 'enlarge' the social justice agenda for rural education – specifically by valuing the voices of rural educators in decision-making. This work also draws upon Corbett's (2007) critique of schooling in the rural, Green's (2008) spatial examination of rural schooling in NSW, Australia, and Downes and Roberts' (2015) examination of rural meanings in the curriculum. Philosophically, I engage with White and Corbett's (2014) call for a greater focus upon the rural in methods, Howley, Howley and Yahn's (2014) call to engage with rurality in research, and most importantly, Sher and Sher's (1994) call to value rural people and communities.

Methodologically, the notion of rereading, or revisiting previous studies, was an approach often practiced by Bourdieu, particularly in relation to his early work on Algeria and Béarn (Grenfell, 2012; Wacquant, 2004; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This approach enabled new insights to be gained from existing work, drawing on new philosophies and theories not available at the time of the initial analysis.

Returning to ideas related to curriculum, as pertinent to this study, I focus here on how rural teachers understand the Australian curriculum. This adds to work examining the role of the rural in curriculum (Roberts, 2014a; Roberts & Downes, 2016). Much of this work has argued that the curriculum is dominated by metropolitan-cosmopolitan knowledges' (Roberts, 2014a; Corbett, 2010). As a social justice issue, this work has suggested that dominant views of equity based on redistributive principles are employed. That is, access to the dominant knowledge is seen as the path to achieving equity, rather than engaging with rural knowledge's and rural places (Roberts, 2014a). In this study, rural teachers' perspectives on these issues are explored.

## RECONSIDERING TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

In this paper I bring the rural standpoint to a re-analysis of survey data from a previous study by Drummond et al. (2012)<sup>1</sup>, as relevant to the issue of curriculum perceptions. Through this approach I have again deliberately foregrounded rural meanings (Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005) in order to reveal how they are represented, or obscured. This is necessary as the focus on 'excellence and equity' removes any reference to places in favour of overarching achievement standards, representations, and a universalised cosmopolitan view of important knowledge for the nation.

The initial report by Drummond et al. (2012) approached equity and excellence from a position of accepting its assumptions in order to test the provision of support to rural schools. Here I adopt the more problematic view of equity and excellence in order to explore rural teachers' understandings of its assumptions, benchmarks and interpretations. By examining the data from a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014b) this approach critiques the assumptions inherent in equity and excellence, by highlighting that they are informed by a metropolitan norm (Roberts & Green, 2013). It suggests, by implication, that equity and excellence may have alternative meanings for rural teachers and communities, and that in order to achieve 'equity and excellence' an approach that takes in a plurality of perspectives is necessary.

The initial paper by Drummond et al. (2012) looked at aspects of the statistical data collected in the survey to identify a problem on a larger scale, and as such presented one version of the truth. Informed by the philosophy of strategic eclecticism (Roberts & Green, 2013), in this reanalysis I

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<sup>1</sup> Aspects of the reanalysis were presented at the 2012 Australian Association for Research in Education conference.

have examined relationships between questions and the qualitative data also collected. For example, in the initial report Drummond et al. (2012) found that school leaders were, on average, undecided to mildly negative about how worthwhile they perceived the Australian Curriculum to be, and that there was general agreement with the statement that a degree of autonomy in the curriculum implementation was important. Furthermore, a number of respondents also used the section about the potential benefits of the Australian Curriculum to raise further negative issues, including noteworthy responses indicating that remote schools had little to gain from the introduction of a national curriculum framework, and that the curriculum was a backward step for education (Drummond et al., 2012). By looking at the relationships between questions and the qualitative data by respondent variables, I can begin to develop a picture of the influences upon these views, and consequently, begin to understand how they impact on students' educational achievement. As with any study, the methodology and assumptions informed the conclusions that were arrived at – both for Drummond et al. (2012) and in this reanalysis.

## SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

This paper draws upon a range of statistical, and qualitative, data. As this data was sourced from existing data sets, and not collected specifically in the course of this study, the approach here is described as a secondary data analysis (Perry & McConny, 2010) of pre-existing primary data. Perry and McConny, (2010) advocate the usefulness of secondary data analysis in policy evaluation, and their value for this inquiry supports the effectiveness of such an approach. As per the approach of this paper, to highlight the manner in which a rural standpoint facilitates new insights, the statistics used herein are directed towards suggesting new interpretations requiring further investigation when the rural is central to research.

The data sourced was sorted and manually cleaned using Microsoft Excel and transferred to the statistical software package SPSS for analysis. 'Standard' descriptive statistical techniques were then used to explore this data for the purposes of this study, e.g., frequency analysis, averages.

As the original article reported in relation to the research design:

*Participants for the research were identified through an Australia-wide network of rural and remote education specialists and the Australian Distance Educators Association. In total, two hundred and thirty three schools and distance education service providers were approached. While the number of schools invited to participate in the research was similar across states and territories, the number of distance education service providers surveyed in each state and territory was more variable as there are fewer such providers, and a sample that included as many as possible was sought. The Australian Capital Territory was excluded from the research because it has no rural, regional or remote schools.*

*Of those sampled, forty-four leaders of rural, regional and remote schools responded, representing an 18.9% response rate, which is comparable to typical response rates for online surveys (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). Responses comprised 35 from leaders of rural, regional and remote schools and 9 leaders of distance education services. Of the leaders who responded, 26 were female and 18 male, with a mean age of 50 years (SD = 9 years). Respondents from rural, regional and remote schools had lived in country communities on average for 25 years (Median = 24, SD = 17 years), and worked in their current position for 4 years on average (Median = 5, SD = 3 years). Distance education service providers had supported rural, regional and remote teaching for an average of 18 years (SD = 7 years). From these data, it can be confidently inferred that*

*participants had considerable experience to draw upon when responding to the survey* (Drummond et al. (2012, p.36).

### **Leximancer**

A further analysis of the written comments to the survey was conducted using Leximancer (Leximancer, 2005) software. Often referred to as computer-assisted phenomenography (Leximancer, 2005), the use of this software is claimed to enhance ‘validity’ (Leonard & Roberts, 2014) by increasing the likelihood that researchers ask the ‘right’ questions (Kirk & Miller, 1986), and letting data lead the generation of these questions. As such, researcher bias in the placing of significance on particular pre-constructions and concepts is reduced with the software presenting relationships that the researcher then needs to seek explanations for, with further manual analysis of the data. Similarly the use of the Leximancer tool can be, and has been here, used to cross-reference researcher manual identified codes. As such the subjectivity of the researcher remains in an, albeit, reduced manner, as the researcher needs to manually examine the data output and interpret this output.

The software uses a *corpus linguistic* approach to textual analysis and identifies concepts used within text, mapping those concepts and relationships between them (Leximancer, 2005). The software makes no assumptions that one concept is more or less significant than any other, leaving the task of interpretation to the researcher. The major contribution of the Leximancer software is to the trustworthiness of a study is in allowing researchers to work with large amounts of data quickly (Penn-Edwards, 2010), and so increase the opportunity to ask ‘good’ questions of the data, simply by asking more questions (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Leonard & Roberts, 2014).

One output of the Leximancer analysis is the concept map, such as the one in Figure 1, which shows dominant themes and associated concepts. The map visually represents concepts and the strength of association between these; those used together more frequently are grouped together while those placed further apart are used together less frequently or not at all. Accordingly, by looking at the position of individual concepts, it is possible to determine the semantic relationships between concepts. By coding each sentence in the source data, Leximancer is also able to position different sources within the concept map. Similarly, the more central the location of a concept on the map, the more it is shared. The lines show concepts used in conjunction in the text responses. Theme circles summarising main ideas group clusters of concepts. Each theme is named after the most prominent concept in the group. Further, themes are ‘heat mapped’ according to the colour wheel (Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, & Chen, 2015). Hot colours (red, orange) denote the more important themes while cool colours (blue, green) denote those less significant. The size of the circles provides an indication of the frequency with which concepts within the theme are used together.

### **Statistical reanalysis**

This section adds to the original analysis reported in Drummond et al. (2012) and Halsey et al. (2011) by looking at perspectives that were not the subject of that initial study. This initial study comprised a questionnaire distributed to leaders of regional, rural and remote schools, and distance education providers in June 2010. It aimed to measure and understand the intricacies of implementing the Australian curriculum in non-urban contexts. The questionnaire was designed to gather data to assess three factors related to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum: firstly, how worthwhile it was; secondly, the level of consultation and resources available; and finally, the level of understanding of the implications of the curriculum (Drummond et al. 2012). Here, in a new and original analysis of the existing data, I look at

selected individual questions that seek to obtain responses in relation to how the Australian Curriculum is perceived to meet local needs and relate to local communities.

The results of the statistical reanalysis are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below. Table 1 reports select survey responses by frequency while Table 2 presents selected significant results from the inferential analysis. The selection is not exhaustive, but has been chosen due to their significance and that they say something about knowing ‘place’. Significance has been determined based on the r value, and p value, [a value representing statistical significance (Field, 2009)] where  $p < .005$  being regarded as a threshold for some significance and  $p < .001$  being considered more ‘significant’. A Pearson’s correlation coefficient is considered to show a small effect at  $r = +/- 0.1$ , a medium effect at  $r = +/- 0.3$  and a large effect at  $r = +/- 0.5$  (Field, 2009; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest that in educational research, correlations from 0.20 – 0.35 show a slight relationship even though they may be statistically significant, but are useful in exploratory relationship research such as this study; correlations of 0.35-0.65 are more significant with a threshold of approximately 0.40 for crude, yet useful, group predictions to be made; Correlations in the range of 0.65 – 0.85 enable reasonably confident group predictions to be made. In this work I regard anything over  $r = +/- .35$  as significant enough to warrant consideration as they suggest relationship between factors that when taken together suggest an influence of place and suggest avenues for future study. Similarly, the numbers involved are relatively small, and as such no firm conclusions can be claimed. Instead the purpose here is to establish the utility of re-examining data from a different perspective and to suggest further areas of research.

**Table 1: Selected Survey Responses by Frequency** (1 Strongly Disagree – 7 Strongly Agree). N=42.

Question	Mean	S.D.	Mode	Median
The National Curriculum does not allow for the importance of local knowledge	3.5	1.4	4	4
The national curriculum will marginalise rural, regional and remote schools	4.2	1.6	4	4
It is important that all schools teach the same curriculum	3.6	1.7	3	3
There has been adequate consultation with rural, regional and remote communities about the national curriculum	2.6	1.6	1	2
Autonomy about how the national curriculum is implemented in rural, regional and remote schools is important	5.1	1.6	6	5



**Table 2: Inferential Statistics**

Correlated Questions		r =	p =	N
The national curriculum does not allow for the importance of local knowledge	The national curriculum will marginalise rural, regional and remote schools.	.003	-.45	42
It is important that all schools teach the same curriculum	The national curriculum will marginalise rural, regional and remote schools.	.038	.32	42
The national curriculum does not allow for the importance of local knowledge	There has been adequate consultation with rural, regional and remote communities about the national curriculum.	.014	.43	32
Autonomy about how the national curriculum is implemented in rural, regional and remote schools is important	The national curriculum does not allow for the importance of local knowledge.	.024	-.35	42
There has been adequate consultation with rural, regional and remote communities about the national curriculum	The national curriculum will marginalise rural, regional and remote schools.	.014	-.39	32

The mean response to the question ‘The National Curriculum does not allow for the importance of local knowledge’ was 3.5 (SD = 1.4), indicating a slight tendency to believe there was some scope for the teaching of local knowledge within the framework of the Australian Curriculum. Participants were largely undecided about whether the Australian Curriculum would marginalize rural, regional and remote schools (M = 4.2, SD = 1.6). The median and modal response to both of these questions was 4, indicating a largely undecided response from participants on these issues.

There was slight disagreement that it was important for all schools to teach the same curriculum (M = 3.6, SD = 1.7) with a mode and median of 3, indicating the most common response to be disagreement. Relatively strong disagreement was also observed regarding the idea that rural, regional and remote schools had received adequate consultation about the national curriculum (M = 2.6, SD = 1.6). For this question, the modal response was 1, indicating that, most commonly, participants strongly disagreed that there had been adequate consultation. Participants agreed with the notion that autonomy about how the Australian Curriculum was taught in rural communities was important (M = 5.1, SD = 1.6). The modal response to this question was 6.

The belief that the national curriculum did not allow for the importance of local knowledge was negatively related to agreement with the statement that the national curriculum would marginalize rural schools,  $r = -.45$ ,  $p = .003$ . In other words, the less participants believed that local curriculum would be allowed for by the Australian Curriculum, the less they believed rural schools would be marginalized. This may reflect the irony of rural schooling – by teaching a localized curriculum, one may ensure that local knowledge is given importance, but marginalize the school from mainstream education (Corbett 2007). This was further supported by a positive correlation between the belief that it was important for all schools to teach the same curriculum

and the belief that the Australian Curriculum would marginalize rural schools,  $r = .32$ ,  $p = .038$ . Thus, the belief that a standardised curriculum was necessary was associated with the belief that, by implementing one, rural schools would be marginalized.

The belief that the national curriculum did not allow for the importance of local knowledge was also positively associated with the belief that rural schools had been adequately consulted about the Australian Curriculum,  $r = .43$ ,  $p = .014$ . Thus, those who believed less scope was available for local knowledge generally also believed that the consultation with rural constituencies had been adequate. This finding might indicate that those who believed local knowledge to be less important believed that less consultation with rural areas was needed. However 'local' was not defined in the study and it is therefore conceivable that if the hypothesis that education values a metropolitan-cosmopolitan worldview is true, respondents would be pre-disposed to view local less favourable.

The belief that autonomy about how the Australian Curriculum was implemented was important in rural schools was negatively related to the belief that the national curriculum did not allow for the importance of local knowledge,  $r = -.35$ ,  $p = .024$ . Thus, when participants believed that autonomy was more important, they were more likely to believe that the Australian Curriculum allowed for the importance of local knowledge (and visa-versa). Perhaps, when autonomy is considered important, more ways of linking the curriculum to local knowledge might be developed by principals.

There was significant negative correlation between the notion that rural schools had received adequate consultation and the belief that the Australian Curriculum would marginalize rural schools,  $r = -.39$ ,  $p = .014$ . Thus, those who believed that consultation was adequate also tended to believe that the Australian Curriculum would marginalize schools less.

There are two possible explanations for what I am suggesting here. Firstly, the national educational discourse, and much existing practice, in curriculum does not raise questions about the nature and purpose of the knowledge encoded in the curriculum. So questioning its use and purpose is not something educators have expertise in. Secondly, these questions were asked within a survey with a different focus. The inferential statistics revealed slight associations between a number of the questions tested, and while by no way used here as conclusions, they do suggest a potential ambivalence requiring further investigation. It is conceivable that engaging with rural place is an untested variable. As the original survey was not designed to test the causality between factors I reiterate that the correlations reported here do not imply causality, instead they indicate relationships, suggest their strength and directions in order to suggest areas of further research. This is due to the likelihood that there may exist an invisible 'third variable' that has not been tested in the study that is, in fact, influencing the results. In this work I am hypothesizing, based on a number of correlations and research cited above, that the 'third variable' that may be hidden yet influential is that of 'rural place'.

The statistical reanalysis revealed an overall belief that the national curriculum did not allow for the importance of local knowledge and that participants were largely undecided about whether the Australian Curriculum would marginalize rural, regional and remote schools. There was slight disagreement that it was important for all schools to teach the same curriculum, but notably, relatively strong disagreement was also observed regarding the idea that rural, regional and remote schools had received adequate consultation about the national curriculum. However, those who believed that consultation was adequate also tended to believe that the Australian Curriculum would marginalize schools less. Notable within the statistics was a tension between a belief that linking to the local was necessary or desirable and attitudes to the Australian curriculum – suggesting a similar continuum as described by Roberts (2013) of more bureaucratically oriented to more place-conscious perspectives of curriculum enactment in rural

places. Notably, the less participants believed that local curriculum would be allowed for by the Australian Curriculum, the less they believed rural schools would be marginalized.

### QUALITATIVE REANALYSIS

Turning to the qualitative reanalysis, it is important to note that school leaders completed the survey, as this position has been shown to have a strong influence on school culture (Hattie, 2009). These responses were initially analysed and reported by Halsey et al. (2011), who identified a concern that communities may be marginalized by the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. Drawing upon the work of Gruenewald (2003) and Moriarty, Danaher and Danaher (2003), Halsey et al. (2011,) asked *will the Australian Curriculum contribute towards a continuation of deficit thinking of rural and remote contexts when it comes to high stakes matters like national curriculum* (p.5). This subsequent analysis looks at this question and explores different influences on how these school leaders view the curriculum. Here the same responses have undergone further analysis from the perspective of purpose and attitudes to the curriculum, rather than through the lens of implementation. According to Drummond et al. (2012):

*The third section of the questionnaire invited participants to respond to four open ended questions. The first two questions were presented as a typical open-ended dyad, inviting participants to write about challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. Specifically, questions asked: ‘What challenges, issues, or disagreements do you have or anticipate in relation to implementing the national curriculum?’, and ‘What opportunities for improving the learning of students and the professional satisfaction of teachers does the national curriculum provide?’ These questions were designed to assess any challenges or opportunities that participants felt the Australian Curriculum provided that the researchers may not have encapsulated in the closed-ended questions. A third question assessed whether participants had any specific resource needs to implement the Australian Curriculum. This question asked: ‘What do you as a leader and manager of a school require to successfully implement the national curriculum?’ Finally, to assess any remaining important participant insights, a final question enquired: ‘Is there anything else you would like to say about the national curriculum and your school?’ Such open ended questions can add important richness to a closed-ended questionnaire design (Boynton, 2004) (p. 37).*

In this re-analysis, the open-ended comments were combined by variables recorded in the respondents profile; for example, ‘Years in community’, ‘Distance from a regional Centre’ and ‘Age’. As there was no initial groupings of variables like distance or years in community, new categories were developed to ease analysis, for example distance was grouped <50KM, 50-99KM, 100-199KM and so forth. The intention was to explore both the general topics raised by respondents in the open-ended comments, and also to examine if distance, years in the community, or age impacted on respondents’ understanding of issues related to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. For example, ‘Curriculum’ is identified in each, and ‘time’, ‘schools’, ‘teachers’, or ‘profession’ used across the concept maps associated to the same themes and original text.

Not surprisingly, ‘curriculum’ was the primary theme identified in the Leximancer analysis, with issues around time, and the needs of staff or teachers, the next strongest themes. As the frame of the survey was in relation to implementation of the curriculum, this was to be expected. However, the framing of one open-text response in relation to ‘improving the learning of students and the professional satisfaction of teachers’, and a free response (‘any other comments’), enabled respondents to look more broadly at the curriculum in relation to their



communities. When these two questions were looked at in isolation from the two implementation questions, a theme emerged in relation to the value of a national curriculum in providing alignment for students moving between states, particularly as many distance education students study via distance schooling because they move around Australia with their parents' work. This alignment, linked to the view promoted by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), of a world-class curriculum, was seen as providing opportunities for students and a level playing field. Concerns of a level playing field were expressed in relation to the requirements of assessment that exists in each state. This reflects that there exists a concern that, within states, there is not a level assessment playing field. However, there was concern that there is no assessment linked to the Australian Curriculum.

These responses appear to reinforce the, rather problematic, dominant view, that in order to provide opportunities for rural students they should be treated the same as metropolitan students. However, I argue that they also illustrate that jurisdictions have not been able to develop sophisticated assessment modes that allow for diversity within a level playing field. The absence of this sophistication has, in the view of these school leaders, disadvantaged their students, and as such, defaulting to a standardized system a natural response to their concern for their students. This interpretation is supported by a strong trend in the non-implementation responses to looking at how the curriculum is taught, rather than what is taught, and to suggest ways to make learning relevant to their students. For example, one respondent suggested that while the curriculum provides a consistent framework, it does not offer a 'kid' focused framework. Such responses suggest an equal recognition of the different contexts of their schools, and create an interesting juxtaposition to concerns for a level playing field. The ongoing interest in mobility suggests a pre-occupation in rural areas about the ability to leave, or an assumption that students will leave. Thus, there is potentially a subtle curriculum message, similar to that identified by Corbett (2007) in Canada, that to 'succeed' in schooling, students need to come to terms with the thought and the prospect of leaving their communities and valuing the ways of other places.

While recognizing the focus of the survey was on implementation, there remained in the non-implementation questions, a strong focus by respondents on time and the work teachers would need to undertake to prepare for the curriculum. This suggests a disposition towards the workload demands of teachers, suggesting that the focus of implementation is staff and not so much the opportunities the curriculum provides for improving student learning. Furthermore, when the concern for a level playing field is considered in relation to this, it suggests that the curriculum concern is primarily about concerns and values of elsewhere, with addressing the particular needs of each community possibly secondary to this.

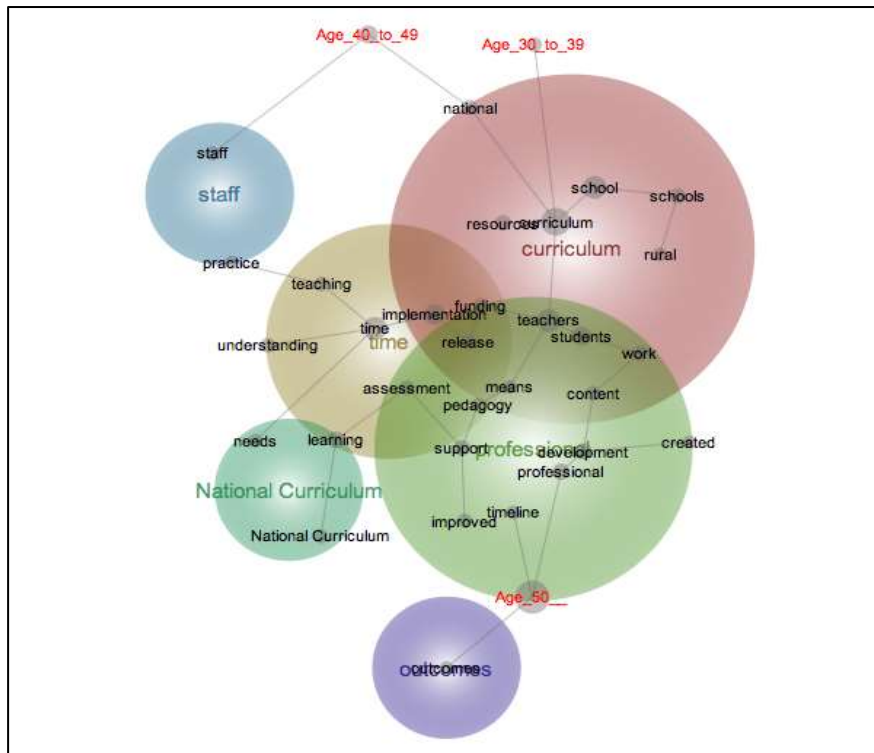
Such generalisations are problematic and by no means represent the entire sample. Instead, the point here is to suggest tensions and to attempt to understand these tensions in order to improve the capacity of rural schools to respond to local concerns. To aid this, the open-ended comments were analysed in relation to the variables of age, years in community, distance from regional centre and jurisdiction. It was believed that these may suggest some different relationships towards the curriculum and community. Aiding this, the Leximancer-produced concept maps shown in figures 1-4 are produced by loading the entire text response to the respondent variables of age, years in community, and distance from regional centre. The concepts shown are derived from the entire text with the proximity to the file markers indicating how strongly or weakly the concepts are associated with particular variables.

## Age

As the role of schools has changed over the previous decades, it was thought that age may suggest different orientations to curriculum and communities. As Connell (2009) outlines, the popular public view of the ‘teacher’ has changed over the last few decades from that of a scholar-teacher to a competent craftsperson, and from the charismatic teacher to, more recently, a ‘good’ teacher. In this conception, constructions of the teacher are linked to the broad social debates and the changing dispositions to culture and society of subsequent generations. In relation to views on teaching and learning, these changes reflect moves from humanistic, rationalist, and more recently neoliberal views of society, and subsequently the role of the teacher. Supporting Connell’s (2009) notion that the popular public view of the ‘teacher’ has changed over the last few decades, and the idea that teachers have internalized these changed identities (Leonard & Roberts, 2014), is the analysis of age in this sample. Here it was observed that while both of these age groups have broadly similar concerns they are in fact approaching them from different perspectives, with the 30-39 age group viewing centralization as a positive and as natural, and the 40-49 age group accepting centralization yet concerned about how to achieve it (Leonard & Roberts, 2014).

Given these changing generational circumstances, it may be expected that age may reveal different views towards the curriculum, with, for example, the older teachers reflecting a more humanistic view and the younger a more technical view. This may be especially so given that Yates (2009) traces a shift in Australia from a view of curriculum incorporating a role of the teacher and a concern for how and whom the curriculum is taught to, to more recently a view that separates what is taught from how it is taught, an approach that virtually erases the nature or context of the learner.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of the respondent age groupings to the themes and concepts identified in their comments. A distinct pattern is discernible between the 30-39, 40-49 and then the 50+ age category. The 30-39 age group are particularly focused upon issues of the curriculum, in relation to aligning what is taught across schools and communities and the available resources. The reference to ‘national’ is either incidental when referring to the ‘national curriculum’ or in reference to a ‘national approach’ and the benefits of mobility. The 40-49 age cohort shares these concerns, but are slightly more connected to the theme of staff, here related to the need of staff to learn about the curriculum and how to teach it, because of its perceived difference from what many teach now. This suggests that if we view the Australian Curriculum as reflecting a modernist approach to curriculum, it becomes unfamiliar to many more experienced teachers. Furthermore, deeper analysis illustrates that this concern is greatest from respondents from states that historically have a more school- and teacher-centred approach to curriculum (see state below). This suggests that while both of these age groups have broadly similar concerns, they are in fact approaching them from different perspectives, with the 30-39 age group viewing centralization as a positive and as natural, and the 40-49 age group accepting centralization, yet concerned about how to achieve it.

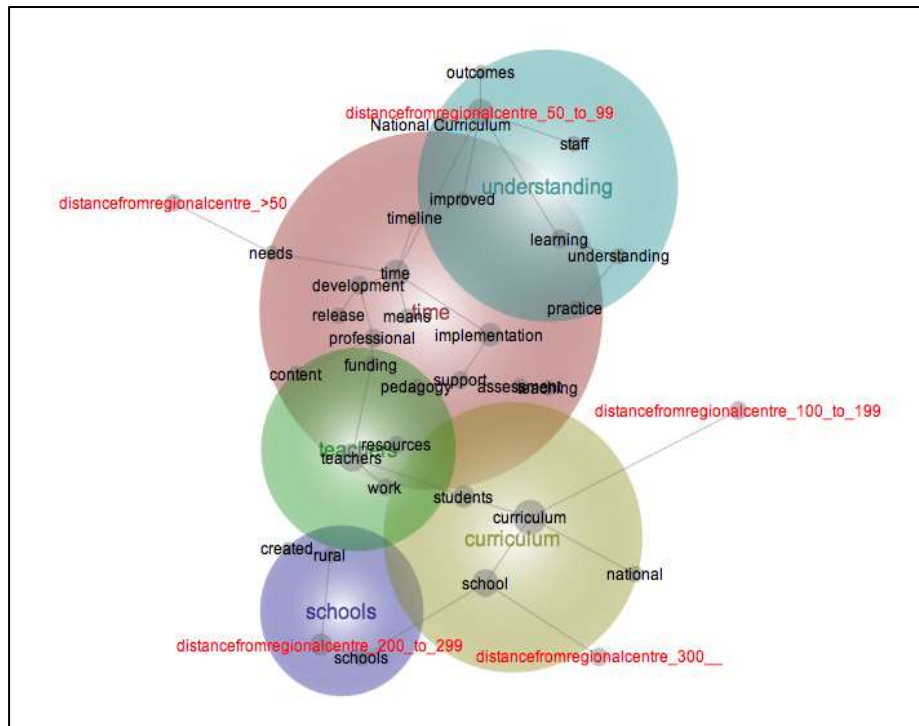


**Figure 1: Age**

Interestingly, the 50+ age category of respondents' comments grouped around an awareness that, without support, things will in reality, continue on as they always have. Given that the respondents are school leaders, this illustrates a valuable insight into just how change does, or perhaps more accurately does not, occur in schools. Following this, this group also commented on the possibility of improved outcomes and achieving equity through a national curriculum, perhaps belying a view towards standards and 'back to basics', that often characterizes educational debate, and a view of equity as related to metropolitan values of achievement (Roberts & Green, 2013). Returning to the question of who the curriculum is for, this age analysis suggests varying degrees of acceptance of the idea that valuing one approach to knowledge as codified in the curriculum is desirable, and an accepted way to achieve what is viewed as equity, for rural students.

### ***Distance from Regional Centre***

Figure 2 shows an analysis of open-ended responses in relation to how far respondents' schools are located to the nearest regional centre. The analysis of distance was included as it was hypothesized that the more relatively isolated communities are, the more concerns may be directed to their local contexts and concerns. Notable from this orientation, the theme of 'time' emerged as only slightly less significant than 'curriculum', and hence, the concept map has been manipulated to make 'time' a spatially larger theme as it was related to more concepts than curriculum in responses. As can be seen in Figure 2, there is a distinct pattern where respondents within 100KM of a regional centre have different concerns to those over 200KM, with the 100-199KM category vaguely in between.



**Figure 2: Distance from Regional Centre**

The pattern of concerns associated with distance broadly supports the hypothesis that relative isolation would relate to a more local implementation concern. As can be seen in Figure 2, the further from the regional centre, the more respondents were concerned about the relationship of the curriculum to their communities and the role of the school in the community. Here concerns were divided between a view that providing consistency between schools would lead to a level playing field and enable mobility for students, and equally about attracting staff, adequate resources, and ensuring the school can (remain) be(ing) responsive to local needs. There was a particular trend in the ‘schools’ theme to suggest that, without ensuring appropriate staffing and meeting the resource requirements, the schools would continue to be disadvantaged.

Considering the theme of ‘time’ and its relationship to distance, it appears that those closer to a regional centre are more concerned about the time to develop programs, obtain adequate resources, and be supported in transitioning to the new curriculum. This possibly suggests that teachers here may live in the regional centre and spend more of their day commuting and, as such, are concerned about the extra work a curriculum revision will cause. Additionally, it may be that proximity to a regional centre relates to greater affinity with the knowledge of the metropolitan areas, as the closely related theme of ‘understanding’, as evidenced by the comments, suggests a concern to ensure they are meeting the intent of the curriculum and ensuring a consistent interpretation across schools. Notably, the further from the regional centre, the more local concerns and the ability to take into account the schools’ context and particular needs emerge. It should be stressed that a number of respondents also focused on national consistency and ensuring students have opportunities to ‘leave’ as raised above.

These findings suggest an interesting avenue to explore in relation to ‘educational scale making’ (Nespor, 2004) and the role relative location has in relation to both implementation, and systemic concerns, versus the concerns of the local. This scale conceivably also creates a point of tension for staff in rural areas as they are forced to confront two views of society: that of the rural, and that dictated by metropolitan elites (Roberts, 2014a). Similarly this analysis raises



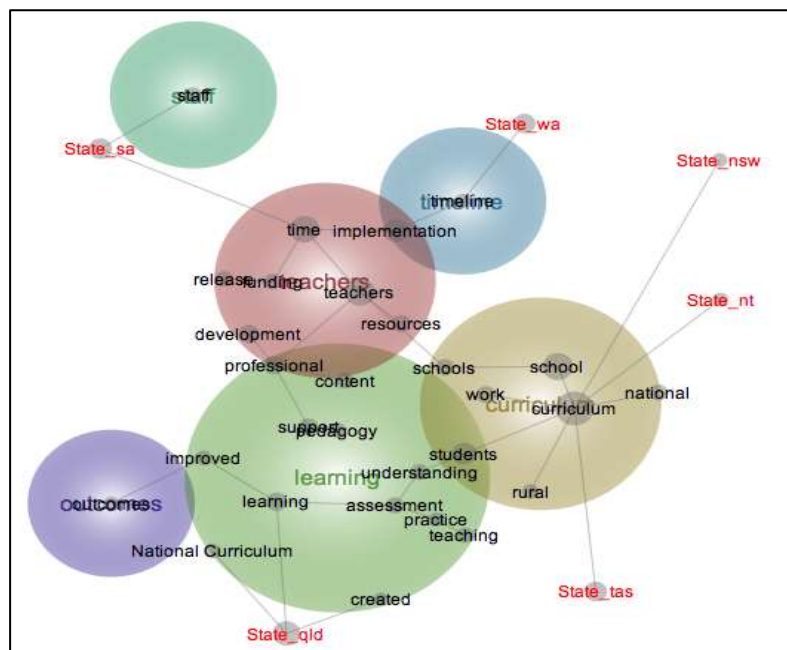


and work in rural areas for long periods. The insights of these teachers, about what constitutes the rural, and how it relates to modern education, would seem to be rather instructive.

On the other end of the concept map, teachers with less than 19 years in the community saw the curriculum itself, and the provision of a national system, as the significant issue. Here responses tended to suggest that, by teaching the same material, they will be able to provide a comparable education, or alternatively, that the curriculum needs to be explicitly planned for. This relates to some views expressed by the younger teachers when age was considered, and suggests a different relationship to the purpose, and role of, a curriculum from something related to learners, to something that provides equity. Between these groups, I can see the separation of curriculum and pedagogy referred to by Pinar (2005) and Yates (2009) as discussed by Roberts (2013).

### Jurisdiction

Drawing upon the notion of different state cultures towards education, generally, and curricular approaches, particularly (Yates, Collins, & O'Connor, 2011; Collins & Vickers 1999), responses were analysed by state/territory jurisdiction. It was hypothesized that states with a history of more school based curriculum development and assessment would be more critical of a centralized curriculum approach, than those with a historically centralised system. As can be seen in Figure 4, respondents from different jurisdictions held a diversity of views, most notably illustrated by the different approaches of New South Wales and Queensland respondents, two jurisdictions with very different approaches to curriculum and assessment. Respondents in New South Wales, with a traditionally centralized curriculum and assessment approach, were concerned about what was included in the curriculum, as well as timeframes, and suggested that curriculum uniformity will be a benefit in improving student learning. Queensland respondents on the other hand, were more concerned about how the curriculum would be taught, and where there was a view that a centralized curriculum would assist equity, it was more student-centred and related to mobility than achievement. As opposed to seeing the content as the means of equity, one Queensland respondent articulated that such a content focus *will result in impoverishing learning and making the gap between our high and low achievers even greater.*



**Figure 4: Analysis by Education Jurisdiction (Australian States)**

Other jurisdictional tags seem to reflect jurisdictional implementation issues. For example, The South Australia tag linked to staff and a concern towards staff training; the Western Australia tag linked to concerns that the implementation timeframe was too short, and New South Wales and Northern Territory respondents had more concern about the implementation timeline than their Queensland counterparts.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have re-examined an existing report from Drummond et al. (2012) from a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014b) in order to examine the place of rurality in the Australian Curriculum (Roberts, 2014a), as understood by rural educators. The use of a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014b) puts the perspectives, knowledges, and understandings of rural peoples at the forefront of the research. In doing so the approach highlights the implicit metropolitan-cosmopolitan (Roberts & Green, 2013) norm in Australian education – as evidenced here in relation to the Australian Curriculum implementation.

The results reported here illustrate how, through a discourse of neoliberal necessity (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), the idea of a standardised curriculum available to all regardless of place, has taken hold. This approach to curriculum sees the nation as one, and all students, and all places, as having the same needs in terms of knowledge. However, curriculum inherently encompasses values, and often the values of the powerful. Here I have drawn upon work that suggests that this ‘powerful’ knowledge is inherently metropolitan-cosmopolitan (Roberts 2014a; Corbett, 2010). However, as Connell (1993) suggests, a curriculum that encompasses some values over others, and through its implementation legitimates underachievement, is unjust.

Through the use of a rural standpoint (Roberts 2014b), and its related method of strategic eclecticism (Roberts & Green, 2013), I have examined the perspectives of rural educators to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. This analysis has shown that, when examined from the perspective of the rural, distinctly different perspectives on the Australian Curriculum become evident. These perspectives show a concern for local places, and a perspective that an Australian Curriculum has the potential to marginalise local knowledges, and rural and remote schools more generally. Furthermore, the re-analysis shows that age, time teaching in a rural or remote setting, distance from a major centre and jurisdiction of the school all influence respondents views in distinct ways. Taken together, these findings implore policy makers, curriculum writers and those implementing the curriculum in their schools to consider the relationship between what is valued in official documents and the interests of the communities they serve. Furthermore this analysis suggests that very principles of ‘equity and excellence’ as a placeless catchall for improving equity may well itself be part of the problem, rather than the solution, to persistent educational disadvantage in Australian education. Indeed, this paper suggests that rural meanings can, and need to, be advocated and included (Howley, Theobald & Howley, 2005) in the curriculum, as to do otherwise perpetuates a form of rural marginalisation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this paper illustrates the utility of re-examining data from a variety of different perspectives. In this case engaging specifically with, and from, a rural perspective. While the format used here is perhaps a little unconventional, the aim has been to draw the reader’s attention to the process and orientation of the reanalysis more than the substantive outcomes of the reanalysis themselves.

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### **Note**

The author was not a member of the original research team and is not affiliated with that team or project. The analysis and data reported here are new both new, though they draw upon the original primary data. This reanalysis was undertaken under the original ethics approval for the original project.

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