



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## A Small Place: Education in Rural Tasmania

**Michael Corbett**, University of Tasmania

**Philip Roberts**, University of Canberra

Corresponding author: michael.corbett@utas.edu.au

The field of rural education has consistently demonstrated that spatial disadvantage has material dimensions related to distance from urban nerve centres that contain services. In turn, distance from urban services entwines with multiple dimensions of social privilege and disadvantage to create specific, more or less place-based, rural, regional and remote cultural geographies. This is a problem that has historically been addressed in a number of ways, including distance-mitigation incentives to a range of system actors such as teachers, principals, students, and parents. In Tasmania, an island state to the south of the mainland Australian continent, the idea that young people have a right to a reasonably accessible, nationally and internationally normative education in their own communities, has only relatively recently been accepted. There is now a persistent, indeed insistent, multi-sectoral call for cultural change in Tasmania regarding access to education. At this writing the state government has committed to extending all high schools which are defined as years 7-10 facilities, to offer years 11 and 12 programming by 2022 (Street, 2017). Some of this discourse responds to the positioning of Tasmania itself as a 'wicked problem' (West, 2013; Cranston et al, 2014). Notably, this discourse related to rural Tasmania echoes similar thinking about social and economic development in advanced capitalist societies around the world.

While defining what constitutes rurality is much debated, there is a general understanding that space matters in education mirroring how what is called the spatial turn in social research has been taken up in the academy and in public policy. Here the concept of rural social space developed by Jo-Anne Reid, Bill Green and colleagues (Green, 2013; Reid et al, 2010;) uses the layered analysis, inspired by the work of French geographer Henri Lefebvre, to build a view of the rural that is real and imagined (Green and Letts, 2007). Rurality is not just a demographic construction; it is simultaneously a powerful symbolic force cutting across national mythologies represented by foundational ideas of frontier (Popper et al, 2000), the bush (Frye and Hutcheon, 1995; Watson, 2014) and country (Somerville, 2013). In this 'real and imagined' rural social space, education is a central concern and implicated in questions of population boom and bust (Corbett and Forsey, 2017) and ecological and food security problematics (Lawrence et al, 2013) which inflect well-trodden paths that situate the rural in national and global economic development agendas (Cervone, 2017a, 2017b; Corbett, 2006; Lawrie et al, 2011; Sassen, 2014). Indeed, the problem is sufficiently pressing in Australia that in 2017, the commonwealth government commissioned an inquiry into rural, regional and remote education.

The new educational demands in this emerging rural space imagine the preparation of a differently educated workforce (Corbett and Baeck, 2016; Corbett and Forsey, 2017), and

a different rural citizen ready to meet the complex demands of a suite of changes on the horizon in the emerging rural future. This will likely require the development of a culture that appreciates and welcomes human diversity, is ecologically sensitive, and is well educated and enterprising. This is the cultural shift that, in our experience, rural leaders support and are working towards, at the same time respecting and building upon established innovative and entrepreneurial traditions in the countryside (Corbett, 2013). Indeed, there is considerable evidence how in Australia a new sensibility is emerging – rural youth are staying in school longer, and Tasmania is no exception. In the recent same-sex marriage plebiscite, it was not rural Australia that voted heavily in the negative, it was urban suburbs containing heavy concentrations of socially conservative new Australians (Le Grand, 2017).

This change has happened, in part, because of global structural shifts in mobilities and technologies, which have generated new forms of production and consumption. As Rittell and Webber (1973) argued forty-five years ago, the “wicked problems” that characterise late modernity and which generate what Anthony Giddens (1990) called an endemic ontological insecurity in all of us, which in turn generate exciting and pressing new problems that we have no choice but to confront. Smith, Fraser and Corbett take up this notion in their conceptual analysis of rural education with/in the Anthropocene in the article that concludes this collection. Part of this challenge is to provide access and opportunity to historically underserved populations that include Aboriginal people (see Stone et al in this issue) and those whose intergenerational livelihoods in primary and secondary industries have been disrupted.

It is important to note that the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifies the entire state of Tasmania as ‘regional’ or ‘remote’. Notwithstanding the statistical and geographic basis of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard, this designation is appropriate as Tasmania retains a complex and multi-layered relationship with time and space - as illustrated by the diverse contributions to the 2013 special issue of the *Griffith Review* entitled *Tasmania: The Tipping Point*. This issue combines poetic meditations on place and identity, critical analysis of contemporary political tensions and historical legacies, as well as socioeconomic analysis and forecasting. As a collection, the *Tipping Point* is characterised by ambivalence and persistent, yet often ambivalent, calls for change, with education positioned as a crucial area of concern and central hope for the future.

Whilst culture is constantly evolving, it is also the case that managed structural and institutional changes are simultaneously shifting cultural practices. In 2015 the Tasmanian state government embarked on a somewhat controversial initiative to “extend” six of the state’s rural years 7-10 high schools to year 12. This project has now expanded to more than 30 schools, some of which are now located in cities or on the urban fringe. Consequently, a program that was designed to provide access to years 11 and 12 programming to rural youth has morphed into an initiative that challenges the established model of urban year 11 and 12 public matriculation colleges. This shift requires youth, and communities, to think differently about how they might interact with differently configured high schools, and indeed some commentators have argued for the closure of the matriculations Colleges (Eslake, 2017). It is, of course, difficult to say how this trajectory will play out in coming years. However, it is likely that the city-based

Colleges will remain, though probably in collaboration with high schools that also offer years 11 and 12 options.

The University of Tasmania has engaged with the ‘problem’ of low levels of postsecondary participation by developing a focus on work-integrated learning and new degree pathways that are more flexible and job-ready, while also leading individual students into further study. The nuances of the lives of these rural Tasmanian students are taken up in different ways by the diverse pieces in this collection from the ethnographic work of Schmidt and Hawkins, to a range of interview-based studies into intervention programs designed to raise aspirations, to quantitative analyses such as that offered by Watson et al and Reaburn et al. What many of these pieces demonstrate as Sutton et al show graphically in their paper, is the way that professionals and civil society actors are coming together to design community-based solutions to globally generated problems. As Marlow and Mather in this special issue illustrate, professional education in the health sciences has already developed a decentralised model of program delivery that reaches out into the state’s rural communities. The same is true of rural medicine, with work in the planning stages to offer the same kind of rurally focussed programming in teacher education.

The papers in this special issue relate to different aspects of building labour forces and supporting learners to manage rapidly changing conditions. In late modernity, all paths seem uncertain, and this sits uneasily with the Australian focus on clear career trajectories - often through specialised forms of schools programming. In rural education, there has historically been a tendency to conflate rurality and vocationalism and Tasmania was a pioneer of what is now called work-integrated learning with the establishment of the Commonwealth’s first area schools (Corbett, Hawkins and Brett, 2017). This is a tension that sits under the surface of these papers, with each raising in different ways questions concerning what education is appropriate, for whom, and how best to deliver it across a challenging geography? While one tension is the academic/vocational nexus. Another is the debate about whether educational offerings ought to focus on relatively placeless and abstract “powerful knowledge” as Michael Young (2007) puts it, or more specific forms of locally-relevant knowledge practices. Vocationalism assumes that for some individuals an education that prepares young people directly for work is most appropriate, with this situated as something particularly relevant to rural places, youth and economies. But is it true? Is urban social space, in a parallel fashion, the natural home of conceptual and abstract knowledge? And what impact does it have on the kinds of aspirations and knowledge/curricular hierarchies that tend to be generated in different geographies (Down et al, 2017; Zipin et al, 2015; Corbett, 2016)? Finally, does the academic/vocational binary and the separation of pragmatic work on the one hand and study on the other create its own categories, inclusions, exclusions that reinforce old stereotypes about who is capable of doing what?

Encouraging individuals to use education to meet their specific objectives, and encouraging systems to be responsive to the individual needs of the socially powerful, has been part of the neoliberal shift in Australian education for a generation. This mirrors the individualisation that marks late modernity, though it is arguably not available to all. The resultant shift from mass education to choice-focussed, bespoke “pathways”

(a distinctly Tasmanian term to describe a young person's educational career) creates significant challenges for rural communities where population density is low, school enrolments are small, and where private educational options challenge the public schools to fund offerings in rural locales.

Throughout this collection we find an emphasis on authenticity and supporting young people through programming that “engages” them in understandable and known activities, but that also connects to their interests and aspirations. Indeed, the very idea of aspirations is problematized in a number of the pieces mirroring a critical approach to this key educational idea. In particular, the way that aspiration is typically framed in conjunction with voluntaristic notions of a free-floating subject - someone who is schooled onto stable and productive career lines that are neither too grand or “unrealistic” for what are defined as his or her capacities, nor insufficiently ambitious and relevant to the needs of society and the demands of knowledge economy job markets. Countering the perception that many rural families ‘don’t aspire’, recent research has debunked the idea that rural families do not aspire high enough (Corbett, 2016; Gelber, 2017; Howley, C. 1997; Howley, C. W. 2006; Watson et al, 2014, 2016; Zipin, 2015). The pieces in this collection support this view and seek instead to understand how rural families aspire in the face of the constraints and affordances they face.

The notion of ‘imagined trajectories’ is often at play in the way aspirations are thought about by/in families. To have aspirations, is it necessary to have a pathway, or a map of where one is going? The possession of this kind of map, and an early commitment to a pathway, is problematic in many of the contexts described in this issue. Such an approach potentially locks young people into a vocational trajectory too early, closing off options, exploration of alternatives, and the kind of maturation a more academic form of schooling might facilitate. For instance, Abbott-Chapman’s idea of mobility for long-term happiness, and focussing on young people’s dreams, in order to actually expand the scope/ambit of what these dreams might contain returns to older less pragmatic ways of framing education as inquiry and exploration. People need to be taught to aspire, they don’t just do it on their own. Here Nussbaum (2011) and Sen’s (2001) capabilities thinking, and what Appadurai (2004) calls capacity to aspire, appear in several of the pieces in this collection. For aspirations to matter they must be connected to authentic, legitimate and understood possibilities that are achievable with the resources people have at hand. How teaching to this end is organized is an open question, but it seems to require some sense of authenticity. Getting students out into “nonconventional learning spaces” (Woodroffe, this issue) is one way of making things real. In this vein, idea of exposure (which relates to authenticity, experience, place and multiple sectors) cuts across the pieces, and particularly, those that focus on aspirations.

In addition to, or in conjunction with, the problem of relevance or authenticity, it is becoming increasingly the case that wicked problems in rural contexts are best addressed by collaborative structures and processes that situate educational improvement within the wider ambit of social and cultural development. This thread weaves through most of the pieces in this special issue. The papers within this edition contextualise rural education culturally, geographically, socially, economically, and in terms of identity, akin to what Pierre Bourdieu called “habitus” - or the relatively durable

and embodied material practices that connect individuals to both their respective communities, families and traditions, but also with their contextual conditions.

One of the most promising avenues to address and facilitate deep cultural change is cooperation across sectors. To illustrate this Sutton et al use digital mapping as a method and a metaphor for understanding the complexity of activities and interests coalescing in one Tasmanian rural community aimed at addressing educational issues. This theme of connections and relationships runs through each of the papers in one way and another, speaking to the importance of linking different sectors of the society, and suggesting what might be called intentional relationality and collaboration as an approach to be supported and deepened. Such an approach necessitates linkages within education, and between education and other private and public actors. Furthermore, non-school people need to know about the school and youth, while school people need connections to the world beyond the classroom walls.

Abbot-Chapman raises the idea of risk and the way that families perceive certain choices as risky or relatively safe. This fits in with Bourdieu's idea of 'necessity' and the way that choice is always inflected by social position. While Bourdieu's language of habitus is taken up in a number of the papers, these authors remind us how this kind of habitual way of thinking and acting is also a way of managing and mitigating everyday risk, as well as the relative perceived riskiness of different trajectories for family members. Several of the pieces in this special edition highlight other well-researched rural education issues such as; the mobility implications of educational aspirations, the transition from small, intimate local primary schools to larger regional secondary facilities, transportation challenges, school choice dynamics, and online and blended learning (a solution or another form of disadvantage?).

Overall, the (untested but established) assumption of superior quality in city schools is balanced off against the more friendly and inclusive atmosphere perceived to characterise rural schools. Such 'romantic' stereotypes should of course be challenged. For instance Corbett et al (2017) compare rural high schools in Tasmania to other Australian schools with similar socioeconomic profiles as reported in NAPLAN results, finding that these Tasmanian schools generally perform as well as, or better than comparator schools. They find a similar pattern comparing urban and rural schools within the state in terms of direct continuation rates into years 11 and 12 reported by the *Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification* and rural students results appear to be stronger than those of urban youth from similarly advantaged communities. A number of contributions to this collection recognise the importance, and indeed, the power of place and communal/familial relationships as well as the social bonds that can operate in rural schools to support education. At the same time though, this work nuances the tension between the lack of critical mass and the challenges that are often faced by schools operating at a distance from urban centres.

The articles collected in this special issue respond in different ways to deficit framing of rural schools in Tasmania, and indeed in rural areas around the world. Our work (Corbett, 2016; Roberts, 2017) has critiqued traditional deficit framings by demonstrating that rural schools can be seen to punch above their weight when compared to urban and suburban

communities facing similar levels of socioeconomic challenge. This is not to dismiss the educational and socioeconomic challenges facing rural Tasmania, but we would conclude by pointing to the intimate connections between the improvement of educational experience and outcomes on the one hand, and a wide suite of relationships and matters of spatially segregated unequal access to resources faced by adults on the other. The challenges confronting rural regions in late modernity are at the intersection of broad social, and political, considerations. Working with them includes education, but it is not limited to education alone.

Methodologically, taken together, the papers brought together in this special edition demonstrate how a sustained focus, informed by diverse perspectives and approaches, can generate important insights into deeply entrenched rural educational phenomena. As a collection, the papers herein show the various ways in which quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches can be deployed to examine rural education issues. In this sense, they provide a case study of both Tasmania, but also of methods for researching educational phenomena in a particular small place caught in the confluence of national and global pressures and agendas.

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