

What Does Social Justice Mean for Education in Rural Australia

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I would like to review some of the major initiatives currently being undertaken across education, i.e. from primary schools to higher education, and including lifelong education and training. I will attempt to show how the needs of rural Australia are being considered in these developments. Also, I will touch on what I believe is still problematic in our approaches.

Underpinning this is my own personal belief that social justice issues need to be foremost in our minds whenever we are making changes within education. Each new development carries with it the potential to reduce or exacerbate inequity or problems of access. I think we are getting better at identifying the likely impact of changes but that doesn't mean to say that we yet have it right.

Over the last few years there have been a plethora of reports relating to rural education:

- * 1973 report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission (Karmel Report), titled Schools in Australia;
- * 1987 Commonwealth Schools Commission Report, Schooling in Rural Australia;
- * 1989 Victorian Ministry of Education/Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Report, The Delivery of Rural Education and Training (DORET);
- * 1990 The DEET Report, A Fair Go;
- * 1990, D'Cruz Report, Technology in Education: A Study of Policy and Practice in Rural Schools.

These reports highlight the disadvantages and also the advantages of rural schooling. Among the advantages are the smaller class sizes and the greater community involvement. Among the disadvantages are the lower achievement rates and the difficulties of having access to a wide range of choices.

The impact of these reports has been substantial and major progress has been made on many fronts.

Following the presentation of the DORET report to the Warrnambool February meeting of the Rural Affairs, Conservation and Environment Committee of Cabinet, The Minister of Education established a rural education reference group to oversee and monitor the staged implementation of the DORET report. A pilot rural education working party has been established in Goulburn North region.

Many new initiatives in rural areas have been developed in collaboration with local communities, and consequently have been very successful in meeting local needs. They have also been diverse, highly innovative and able to serve the wider education community as innovative models useful for translation to metropolitan communities.

Most successful of these has been the Country Education Project (C.E.P.) and the school clusters project which is aimed at increasing retention to Year 12.

Perhaps the most visible evidence of these changes can be seen by looking at school retention rates. In 1981 the Victorian retention rate in rural government schools Year 7 to Year 12 was 22 per cent; in 1990 this has reached 66 per cent. This result is magnificent and will be durable. On the debit side, this still lags behind retention in metropolitan areas by some 9 per cent.

Developments in Schools

The Ministry of Education's general policies to encourage greater community involvement in the management of schools will be a major long term benefit to rural communities. Given the nature of rural communities this involvement should be easier to achieve in the country than it is in metropolitan areas.

Several new initiatives offer challenges to rural educators and the wider rural community. For example, the Reading is Magic program demands commitment from parents to read with their children. Also, the successful reading recovery program needs to be adapted to be capable of being offered to one teacher schools. It may be necessary to develop cluster arrangements and special training initiatives, or other ideas which rural communities can offer us.

The recent review of the Country Areas Program (Country Education Project in Victoria) showed that the project was having significant impact on the quality of rural education. The key features of the project: viz

- i) area committees (made up of schools and community representation),
- ii) local decision making,
- iii) devolved funding, and
- iv) identification of problems and solutions,

have led to greater resource sharing and innovation. These innovations have included support for primary clusters, mobile art and craft vans, mobile classrooms, students networks and secondary student small business programs.

The Ministry has followed the lead of rural clusters and telematic networks and established a telematics unit and working party to co-ordinate the use of more flexible delivery options and to make sure that the best curriculum experiences are equitably available throughout the state.

One major achievement is the use of the rural school clusters and telematic facilities to deliver in-service and professional development to teachers in remote areas.

The State Board of Education's Social Justice Schools Project is seeking to develop models whereby the principles of social justice can be incorporated into the whole school (and school cluster) planning. This is particularly focussing on:

- i) enrolment retention,
- ii) curriculum comprehensiveness,
- iii) group access,
- iv) group success, and
- v) involvement of parents and students in decision making.

Two pilot programs are currently running in rural areas: Morwell, and Swifts Creek/Omeo.

Developments in TAFE and Higher Education

Overall, attempts are being made to increase the range of options so that going away for tertiary study is not the only choice available to rural students.

Within Victoria we have sought to ensure that TAFE colleges are developed in most major centres and that out-reach centres exist for smaller communities. In this we are undoubtedly more fortunate than the larger, more sparsely populated states.

As well we are experimenting with ways of using new technology to bring education and training to rural areas. The use of satellites and vistel for audio and video conferencing are already proving promising. Most of these developments involve TAFE colleges and tertiary institutions working together to enable students to gain greater access to tertiary courses, e.g. the joint project between Sunraysia College of TAFE and Bendigo College of Advanced Education for first and second year in B.Bus, first year in B.A., third and fourth year in social work and a range of teacher training courses.

Rural colleges and the Office of Corrections are currently experimenting with a range of techniques for bringing vocational education programs into rural prisons. The lessons from these experiments will prove of wider benefit.

Further Education

Establishment of the Division of Further Education with 6 of its 11 regions in rural Victoria is making a major contribution to expanding flexible learning systems to adults.

Further education courses operate through neighbourhood houses and community learning centres as well as the major colleges, and offer an extremely decentralized and accessible form of adult education for rural communities.

With its blend of formal adult education courses ranging from basic literacy programs to adult VCE courses, and its range of hobby and leisure programs, it fulfils an important community development role as well as community education role.

Use of volunteer tutors and teleconferencing makes it possible to provide further education to the most isolated areas.

Major gains have been made in the provision of adult VCE courses through the east Gippsland area as a result of a project in which the local TAFE colleges uses the far east Gippsland school telematics networks after school hours. This model is now being trialled in Wangaratta and schools at Mt. Beauty, Corryong and Tallangatta.

Higher Education

The recent amalgamations will create stronger tertiary institutions more able to make a range of programs available.

The flexible learning and telematic initiatives so successfully developed in rural schools and further education will be used and developed further by these tertiary institutions. The use of TAFE colleges to run parts of tertiary courses is also proceeding rapidly and effectively.

Micro Economic Reform

Award re-structuring will offer opportunities for rural Australians to upgrade their skills on the job. As part of the new training guarantee, employers will be offering more training opportunities as part of award restructuring.

This development offers exciting new possibilities for re-skilling the workforce. It also poses a major challenge to those involved in working in rural areas.

Problems we will have to face include how to make that basic education and training available to small isolated firms and industries, how to prepare enough skilled teachers and how to develop a culture of workplace training across all rural industries.

Where Next?

Major steps have been made but more action is needed. There are great strengths in the community networks in rural areas - we need to use these more.

We need to recognise that the range of resources available for rural education can be utilised to deliver education and training. For example, schools in towns can provide for delivery of adult courses either face to face or through telematic delivery.

We need greater co-operation across the four sectors of Education. One of the ripple effects of the Resource Agreement #3 has been to encourage and develop involvement of all sectors.

We need also to be aware of the needs of the new rural poor who are refugees from the city who often have no networks and are alienated as a result.

We face a challenge of forming new partnerships and developing educational programs which are responsive to broader rural priorities - steps already taken here include the recent environmental education package, Greenhouse Action Australia and Salt Watch.