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Editorial: Researching the Intersections of Rurality and First Nations Education

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As a researcher with a long history of working in rural and remote educational spaces I have been conscious of the important learning issues facing Australian First Nations students. In the past I have focused much of my attention on the particular needs of First Nations students in remote parts of the Northern Territory. Apart from adding unique empirical findings to the field of study, my research highlights the important and powerful role of language as it is used to frame, define and describe rurality and First Nations education.

Whilst attending the South African Educational Research Association's 2018 conference I was reminded of the power of language and the importance of context. In one presentation a Filipino scholar used the term 'Indigenous' to describe the experiences of Filipino First Peoples she was working with, and making comparisons to the South African context. She was politely reminded that this is no way to refer to people in South Africa (see Barnard, 2006). My mind also drifted to a conference in Darwin in 2017 where a North American's comments led to audible gasps when she described Aboriginal people as 'natives'. Both examples illustrate the importance to be mindful of labels and respectful of cultural protocols in different contexts. Awareness is amplified when discussing issues related to rurality and First Nations Peoples.

The intersection of rurality and First Nations education is further problematised within western orientated education systems trying to meet the needs of those with different epistemologies, axiologies and ontologies. Conversely, challenges for First Nation learners are problematised within a culture of learning embedded within education systems that require them to adapt to the assumed knowledges, systematised racism, foreign languages and philosophical positions which are far removed from their own cultural knowledges.

So why the need for a special edition on First Nations *rural* education? Surprisingly, there is almost no literature within Australia that discusses the significance of *rurality* in First Nations education. Many research articles describe the significance of *remoteness* in First Nations education. Much of the extant research is built on a premise that remoteness goes hand in hand with disadvantage and outcomes often described as 'poor' and 'failing'. The lack of literature on First Nations 'rural' education coupled with the deficit language discourse surrounding First Nations 'remote' education triggered a global investigation into the topic.

So How Does the Rural Affect First Nations Education?

In this special edition we find a diverse mix of rural research contexts discussed in papers from Australian, South African and Vietnamese authors. I asked authors not to just consider their work

in the context of rural but to see their research *in the rural* and the rural *in their research*—a ‘generative space’ (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015).

History

Ratcliffe and Boughton’s article on a Cuban literacy campaign applied to communities of western New South Wales introduces the Australian articles. The ‘Yes I Can’ campaign they write about as part of Ratcliffe’s doctoral thesis, has a long and extensive international history. All of the rural contexts they describe have high proportions of Aboriginal people and as the authors note those people are marked by low levels of literacy. However, scattered throughout the article are references to history. At one point the authors comment: ‘Despite the ravages of colonisation, people continue to hold important cultural knowledge’ and drawing on Freire (1970), note that ‘As people develop their literacy skills, they undergo a transformation in their sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence... the process by which people shift from viewing themselves as objects of history and come to understand their role as subjects of history and thereby recognise their agency’. It’s almost as if adult literacy has redeemed a rural history and turned it around for ‘good’. Also in New South Wales, Lowe, Bub-Connor and Ball’s paper takes us to the perspectives of rural teachers and from redemption to epiphany. The conversational narrative style of presentation allows you to enter the minds of teachers and researchers in the rural school context. The epiphany is described by Bub-Connor, who was, as a newly appointed teacher coming to grips with the complexities of teaching and learning together with the challenge of community engagement in a ‘a place and space of contestation and epistemic collision’. After what sounds like a long struggle she comes to realise that the key to her questions was listening, and realising ‘that she needed to engage students on their terms—on their Country, in their cultural space, and with their accompanying identities’.

For those of us who have lived in rural towns for much of our lives, there are things we love and things we can’t stand. I lived in one town in Tasmania for 21 years. I loved the environment, especially the beach and I was happy to describe myself as being from Ulverstone. I loved that my children had great educational opportunities and that they excelled. I didn’t like the insular mindsets (this is not meant to be derogatory as by definition Tasmania is an island) of some people and I hated the lack of work opportunities. I use this illustration to introduce Oliver and Exell’s article on rural Aboriginal young people in Western Australia, who have been part of the Clontarf Academy program. There are several really positive ways that these young people in a learning environment saw themselves not as dichotomised rural or Aboriginal young people as people who embraced an wholistic identity that was both/and. But there was one thing the students didn’t like in this ‘old racist’ town. And even though racism was seen as normalised, the Academy provided a safe learning space where resilience and culture was valued and supported.

Meanwhile, across the continent in rural Queensland, Hogarth’s article, drawing on her positionality as a First Nations woman, invites us to hear her story about her teacher experiences. Hogarth does this beautifully, critically reflecting on her position as the ‘only Indigenous teacher’ at the school and how that positioned her in the school community and the broader community. She describes it as a tug of war, with racism, exclusion and betrayal. The point about rural being in the research and vice versa comes out beautifully in a moment of black humour around language. This incident reminded me a recent bus ride in Darwin. As some of the locals got off, the first few said ‘Thank You Driver’ as they jumped off while the one at the end said in the same Aboriginal English ‘Thuck You Driver’ while the rest of the locals erupted in laughter and the white mouths opened wide in disbelief. Black humour.

Speaking of Darwin, as I look out across the harbour from my balcony at home I can just about make out the small community that Walker uses as her Masters thesis study site for her paper on boarding experiences of disengaged youth. Darwin is considered by My School to be ‘Outer

Regional' on the remoteness scale (for some reason it used to be called 'provincial'). But Walker's community school, from which all her respondents came, are classified as 'remote', even though it takes just 20 minutes to get across the harbour on the ferry. Here we find an interesting question about what makes rural 'rural' and not remote. Walker at first questioned whether her article would fit the special edition. My point back to her was for her to set aside arbitrary notions of remoteness definitions and consider her site as 'rural'. The paper provides valuable insights into the thoughts of these young First Nations people. One of her important findings is that while most of the disengaged youth in her study wanted to re-engage in some kind of education, they simply did not know how. I'll leave readers to ponder why that might be.

Challenges

Van Lo and Welch's article on rural Thai ethnic students in north-west Viet Nam, sheds light on the multiple challenges students from his home region face as they progress through an education system dominated by a Vietnamese political hegemon. These students show incredible resilience in the face of poverty with cultural and language loss a constant threat. Rurality dominates the landscape of the paper as the authors describe four students' experiences. However at the interface of the rural and the system we find descriptors such as 'inferiority', 'isolation', and 'teachers who don't care' while at the end of the day students are expected to walk a long way home and support their family's subsistence farming lives. Hlalele, writing from a rural South African standpoint raises the important issues of the intersection of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), sustainable learning and curriculum. He describes the sense of powerlessness and hopelessness local people feel as they battle to sustain an education which includes IKS. He alludes to the point that an education without IKS is unsustainable, but concludes with comments that those of the rural are marginalized primarily because they are seldom heard, 'their knowledge is underappreciated and their needs are barely addressed in broader national development strategies'.

Leadership

Wrapping up the series, the paper by Davies and Halsey looks at school leadership, based on Davies' doctoral thesis, drawing on data from 31 rural, regional or remote schools gathered through Dare To Lead's *Collegial Snapshot* process. These schools were all characterised as having high proportions of First Nations students. From the findings, the authors propose that the role of the leader is that of a 'protagonist' which allows local culture to be infused with school culture to create environments where there are 'no boundaries to learning'. Fundamental to their contention is the need for local collaboration and engagement between schools and community stakeholders.

Bringing these papers together, it is heartening to see so much emerging research that draws on the rural, not just as place for research, but where it is embedded in the researchers themselves. As you read through the papers the standpoints of the rural researchers and practitioners come through loudly. What also stands out are eight quite different angles of rural First Nations education. We see access, racism, power, history, colonisation, leadership, engagement and disengagement all coming to the fore. And while I might have played down 'context', it clearly does make a difference.

Comparing the two international papers with the others it is not too difficult to see how similar issues express themselves in different ways, but where issues such as access are exacerbated through lack of resources, politics, power and corruption. That said, the articles are not just about the problems of the rural. Rather they highlight the very creative approaches used by leaders, teachers, community members and the resilience of many students.

Another point worth noting is that rural is defined, not with some kind of uniform stereotype but where the features of rurality can be interpreted quite differently depending on the standpoint of the author and depending on the socio-political context. With all these positive contributions, there is still room for more. For example, there are no quantitative studies here. There are no studies that address what a contextually responsive curriculum might look like. Nor are there studies that show how rural First Nations students excel. It is also interesting to note that beyond my encouragement for authors to explore the influence of the rural for their work, they struggled to think through this—deferring to the more common approach of using the rural as an inert canvas on which to paint their research. Regardless of the need for more work I am really pleased that in this special edition we have made a start in highlighting a particular aspect of rural education that has to date received little attention.

References

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