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DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CONNECTIONS THAT SUSTAIN RRR COMMUNITIES

Welcome to the third issue of AIJRE for 2019. This collection of papers from regional, rural and remote (RRR) Australia, Nigeria, Scotland and the United States provides an important dialogue with diverse perspectives about the connections that sustain RRR communities. The body of work brought together here offers the perspectives of learners, teachers, leaders, administrators, researchers and community members.

The medium for sharing concerns, offering solutions and celebrating achievements is their perspectives of lived experience. These researchers have relied upon an interpretive approach to utilise a range of methodological and theoretical lenses to examine their contexts and explore understandings that have been created within complex social networks. The perspectives collected communicate the value of connection between institutions, networks, resources and knowledge. Within these perspectives there is also concern about the inequitable access to those very same elements. These realities are not new to these communities, to the researchers nor to our broad learning community interested in confronting them; however, the perspectives offered here provide cause for attention and in some instances optimism. Consequently, it is exciting to present these papers as snapshots of perspective along a continuum of experience across the RRR landscape.

The perspectives shared within this issue include ways of engaging vulnerable students as they make their way through tertiary study in regional contexts through to priorities for preparing the next generation of teachers for RRR contexts. They include the voices of administrators grappling with implementation of urban-centric priorities and teachers' perspectives on how to re-orientate professional learning around local concerns. Other perspectives emphasise reasons to celebrate localised pedagogy, curriculum and practice. The connections evident within these papers emphasise what is valued and valuable. As a result, these connections act like threads between the papers and between these RRR communities separated by great distance, cultural contexts and lived realities. The communities and cohorts presented here are looking to strengthen the ways that connections mitigate the challenges of distance and enhance the opportunities to thrive as a result of them. Each contribution provides insights into the important work going on in these communities and offers invaluable perspectives to further each conversation.

Issue 3, 2019: Diverse Perspectives on Connections that Sustain RRR Communities

The first paper by Marcia Delvin from Victoria University and Jade McKay from Southern Cross University provides a useful orientation to this issue's focus on diverse perspectives. This paper orientates us with a focus on the outcomes associated with effective teaching and learning for regional, rural and remote (RRR) learners and teachers. Delvin and McKay draw our attention to the enduring challenge of supporting RRR students to make productive transitions to tertiary learning.

Despite sustained attention and attempts to increase retention and strengthen outcomes, recent data highlights that progress in this area remains slow (Productivity Commission, 2019). Equally, the challenges associated with transitions to university life remain diverse and considerable for many RRR students (O'Shea, 2019; Pollard, 2018). In response, Delvin and McKay present a success-focused methodological approach to look at what works for students from low SES backgrounds. By positioning this as a shared priority between student an institution, research attention explores the ways students and their institutions made adjustments to ensure success.

A student cohort of 69 students were recruited and interviewed to explore perspectives on what had contributed to their success. These students were categorised as successful because they had reached subjects within their final year of their programs of study. Alongside this cohort, 26 expert staff were recruited to share their perspectives on institutional approaches to generating success. Analysis of this data offers important perspectives on understanding the needs and circumstances of learners, connecting them to their place of study and providing an inclusive approach that helps them to deal with the realities of university life. Here, the qualitative responses of students provide insights into the complex lives they live and the considerable challenges they have overcome to succeed.

The Second paper by Suzanne Hudson and Peter Hudson from Southern Cross University argues for a strategic, informed and sustainable approach to preparing preservice teachers for RRR teaching. Aligned to the priorities expressed in Halsey's (2018) review into RRR education, Hudson and Hudson highlight the ongoing challenges of preparing, recruiting and retaining high-quality teaching graduates for a career beyond the urban fringe.

By bringing together a considerable body of Australian literature, the authors emphasise the influential nature of partnerships between initial teacher education providers, school systems and leaders in creating sustainable pathways to graduate teaching in rural and remote schools. Understandings gained from White et al. (2009), Hudson and Hudson (2009), Reid et al. (2012) and Trinidad et al. (2014) and are used to emphasise the relevance and impact of strategic partnerships for preparing preservice teachers for RRR teaching.

The research reported on here is a small-scale interpretive study of five preservice teachers engaged in one such project. Project participants applied for and were selected to undertake their professional experience placements (Work Integrated Learning) within a remote school as part of a targeted strategy to raise preservice teachers' awareness, interest and capacity for RRR teaching. The school's principal had previously sought connection with the initial teacher education provider as a mechanism to identify and recruit graduate teachers to their school. Four of the five participants from the reported cohort went on to commence teaching in a RRR context. This data, along with data from previous cohorts' pathways into RRR teaching, are offered as indicators of effectiveness at introducing preservice teachers to the contexts, schools and classrooms of rural and remote Australia. Of particular interest here is the voice given to the participating preservice teachers to explain the importance of their experiences. Through semi-structured interviews, preservice teachers provide perspectives on their understandings of their remote community, school and classroom and the subsequent impact that these insights made to their concepts of themselves as emerging educators and their motivations to pursue RRR pathways.

The third paper by Helen Coker from Queen Margaret University in Scotland draws our attention to the opportunities and mediating impact of access to professional learning via digital technologies and networks. For teachers located in rural and remote Scotland, their professional learning opportunities have been shaped by their geographic constraints. In Scotland, as in other parts of the world (Phillip, Cottrill, Farrington, Williams & Ashmore, 2017), broadband connectivity is expanding. Access to broadband is unevenly distributed between urban, rural and remote communities and this has particular implications for teachers and their students located in isolated districts. Here, Coker emphasises the challenges of distance and access are being

confronted through advances in digital technologies and improved connectivity. Despite this, the flow of information and opportunities to access this is itself governed by the mechanisms for providing that access.

Within the Scottish context, the responsibility for the provision of professional learning sits with local authorities, which are also subject to the constraints of their rural and remote contexts. Furthermore, these local authorities interpret and filter what information is available. This means that RRR teachers are impacted by what is available and what is made available to them. The limitations of opportunity and access therefore have implications across the career stages for teachers.

Drawing on literature that situates the broad and all-encompassing role of rural and remote teaching within the social milieu of the local community, Coker applies a qualitative approach to her study. Through a theoretical lens of cultural perspectives, practices and language shaping meaning, Coker explored how teachers were able to access professional learning opportunities and how they understood their own engagement in them, with and through others. This lens emphasised the social and professional capital that flows across and through professional learning networks (Wenger, 1998).

Eighteen participants were recruited from across the north and west of rural Scotland. These participants ranged in experience from between 1 to 18 years of experience and were drawn from a range of educational settings. Importantly, the ways that digital connectivity mediates these social and relational practices impacts how the teachers themselves mediate the interactions and products of engaging in professional learning across time and distance. Coker leads us to consider the implicit and explicit ways that information flows through professional learning communities isolated by distance and constrained by access. Her extended discussion details the complexity of relationships between teachers, their rural teaching contexts and the ways that these factors influence the flow of capital and how this can and is utilised. Underlying Coker's discussion is recognition of the considerable opportunities that are made available through digital connectivity within rural and remote communities and the subtle but influential factors that mediate it.

The fourth paper introduces a philosophy of education developed by the Warramiri Yolŋu that encompasses the people's priorities for place-based pedagogy and curriculum. This project comes from Gäwa, East Arnhem Land. Ben van Gelderen from Charles Darwin University and Nungalinya College Indigenous Corporation and Kathy Guthadjaka from Charles Darwin University emphasise the connection between a critical Indigenous methodological framework designed by Yolŋu Elders and how this has been incorporated into community research in Gäwa. The products of this work include an 'on country' and 'through country' pedagogy and contemporary curriculum development that prioritises local perspectives.

van Gelderen's journey, from an outsider coming into the community to live and teach through to his adoption into the Yolŋu gurruṯu (kinship) system and transition to a community member with all of its inherent responsibilities, is considerable. His insider/outsider perspectives within this community and research setting situate him uniquely, to contribute to and shape the research undertaken within this context. The methodological and cultural perspectives shaping this work meant that it was vital to have the 'right people talking to the right people in the right place at the right time in the right order' (Christie, 2013, p. 49) and van Gelderen's perspectives were influential in determining these factors. This was essential to ensuring that the project reflected appropriate respect for others' perspectives and reflected the shared histories at the heart of the project. From this, the value of the process and the products of curriculum creation, pedagogical priorities and locally-derived teaching practices can be witnessed.

The fifth paper by Stephen Bolaji from Charles Darwin University, Glenda Campbell-Evans and Jan Gray from Edith Cowan University offers recommendations to support the implementation of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria. The UBE program seeks to provide free and equitable

access to compulsory education for school-aged children, appropriate educational outcomes for young people not engaged through formal education settings and a range of outcomes for adults who have not benefitted from those opportunities earlier in life. These provisions are made available through a range of strategic supports, objectives and funding sources (Ejere, 2011).

Bolaji, Campbell-Evans and Gray contribute this paper as part of their larger study of the implementation of UBE in Nigeria. After more than a decade of implementation many Nigerian school-aged children remain out of school. A rapidly increasing population combined with challenging economic conditions are identified as influential factors however the researchers also focus attention on managerial oversite of UBE.

From these insights the research team developed a qualitative study to explore perspectives of 20 key stakeholders (local education administrators) within two regional districts. Their analysis of data reveals that those involved in implementation with regional districts identify a concentration on urban priorities and perspectives as influential to implementation within the regions. Their perspectives highlight disorderly and inconsistent implementation and external priorities that limit the outcomes that can be realised through UBE. In response, the identified challenges of delivering a complex program across diverse regional, rural and remote areas lead the researchers to argue for regional administration. In their view, this reorientation would engage regional communities, concentrate skills and knowledge in effective ways and enhance ways of monitoring and assessing the implementation of UBE.

The concentration of authority, perspectives and decision-making within urban centres and the subsequent impact on RRR communities is a central concern for Bolaji, Campbell-Evans and Gray. This is also a central concern of the final paper in this issue. The final paper is contributed by Casey Jakubowski from the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at State University of New York, Albany. Here, Jakubowski offers his own voice to the diverse perspectives carried through this issue.

Retracting rural populations in up-state New York combined with a constraining funding environment have combined to place pressure on rural communities in New York State's rural communities to consolidate resources, including their schools. Jakubowski describes how the prospect of losing the community school to a consolidation process evokes powerful perspectives and concentrates attention on understandings of the institution's overall importance to the rural community (Sipple, Francis & Fiduccia, 2019). Community responses to externally-driven educational reforms initiated within urban centres some distance from rural communities elicit compelling perspectives about the place of the school within rural communities.

Jakubowski uses discourse analysis to interpret the voices and sentiment carried by rural communities, through social and traditional media. Then, his own narrative is contributed to the discussion, providing a researcher's personal perspective on the lived experience of educational and community reform. Within this context of this issue, Jakubowski's perspective is presented as a counterpoint to expanding access, opportunities and outcomes for rural students. While the stated drivers of educational reform within this context includes the enhanced educational outcomes for up-state New York students, Jakubowski interprets the agenda through responses from the local community. This paper communicates that the lived experience of the reform is confronting, troubling and highly emotive.

Lastly, this issue's Rural Connections contribution comes from Ann-Maree Paynter and Elizabeth Taylor from the Attraction Team within Queensland Department of Education. This team's award winning approach to attracting teachers to rural and remote Queensland schools is captured in this snapshot of practice. This case study outlines the challenges of anticipating and responding to the changing profile of the RRR teaching workforce. The common thread again carried through this contribution is the value of perspective. This attraction team calls on the teaching workforce

throughout Queensland to provide insights into RRR teaching through career fairs and networking opportunities. Just as Hudson and Hudson emphasise through their paper, demystifying RRR teaching communities, schools and classrooms goes a long way towards helping graduate teachers to realise alternate teaching futures (and the word is getting out). Perspectives from those who have lived that RRR teaching experience continue to resonate with prospective teachers and attendance at these career fairs and events continue to rise.

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