



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

*Editorial*

## Community as an Anchor, Compass and Map for Thriving Rural Education

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A sense of community is of critical importance to educators. Community features heavily in the research literature about student belonging that stems from connections within school, between school and home and to networks beyond the school gates (Watson & Battistich, 2006). Notions of school community are influential in shaping the life and culture of schools, as those who create connection shape what it means to belong, identify and contribute (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie & Waters, 2016). Halsey (2018) states that schools are central to community more generally within regional, rural and remote places and act as an anchor point for community to build around. Campbell and Yates (2011) reiterate this by explaining that within rural and remote locations the school is the centre of the community. Community is often prominent in recruitment drives to lure graduate teachers to rural, regional and remote schools (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). This concept is also dominant in our thinking about teachers' communities of practice and the influence that these have over the nature and products of teachers' work and lives (Wenger, 2000). Community contributes to notions of what life is like beyond city limits. Community is conceived in various ways but often with some relationship to the glue that binds people together, the bounce that enables people to respond to hardship and adversity, and, the opportunity to connect when coming together is critical. Community captures and communicates a sense of something meaningful, influential and significant.

The papers presented in this issue gravitate around notions of community within rural, regional and remote education. As emphasised above, these concepts of community are not new to us in education, particularly those of us with an interest in the teaching and learning that happens beyond the city limits. This concept is not new to our readership either, having already devoted attention to community in an earlier issue in 2020 and across the journal's significant history. What these papers offer here is new perspectives on the priorities being pursued, the programs being developed and the opportunities arising from engaging community in all aspects of teaching and learning. This issue incorporates priorities and perspectives being sought about alternative models of education for remote Indigenous adolescents (Britton, Redman-Maclaren, Ham & Bainbridge, 2020). It reflects on ways that Tasmanian parents are engaging other parents within their communities in discussion and planning for their children's post-school education (Kilpatrick, Burns, Katersky Barnes, Kerrison & Fischer, 2020) and the ways that rural

undergraduate students are finding community and capacity through their academic mentors (Burns, 2020). The issue explores preservice teachers' notions of readiness for teaching in rural and remote schools following targeted placement activities (Hudson, Young, Thiele & Hudson, 2020) and considers the ongoing professional learning needs of mathematics teachers and the opportunities afforded by their communities of practice (Bui et al., 2020). As a concluding note, this issue incorporates insights gained from the other side of the world, where the experiences of teachers crying in cupboards provides valuable insights about what communities offer their teachers (Burns, Fogelgarn & Billett, 2020).

Each of these papers provides insights and perspectives about the ways that communities operate, often overtly and often surreptitiously, to contribute to the educational outcomes for those people it holds dear. The implications of these diverse perspectives say something about the strength of the fabric that is community within regional, rural and remote education and why we continue to return to this notion when we have something important to explore within these places. Returning to Halsey's (2018) advice, these papers point to the notion of community acting as an anchor, keeping the community grounded and stable. Moreover, through these papers community appears as a compass, emphasising courses of action to help navigate complexity and challenge. They also situate community as a map that articulates what is already known and familiar within these places and how this informs new ways of tackling new and persistent challenges. In these ways, these papers return us to important themes that White (2015) draws together. These include the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) communities draw on, the rural social spaces that characterise community (Reid et al., 2010), and place consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003). Importantly, White (2015), like the authors of these papers, adopts a rural standpoint when approaching this work. This means that the narrative that runs through this issue is one of engaging with, being part of, and honouring the communities with which they work (White, 2015).

The first paper, by Britton et al. (2020), provides a systematic review of literature exploring the attributes of alternate models of education for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents not engaged in education programs. These models of education exist to support students whose needs are not met through mainstream approaches. Wilson, Stemp and McGinty (2011) highlight characteristics of best practice within alternate models developed for disengaged youth and expand this to include targeted features necessary within education settings specifically. Central to this agenda is a concentration on school as community, with relationships between teachers and students being seen as the most distinctive feature of alternate models (Raywid, 1982). The outcomes of alternate models identified through this review include: increased participation, belonging and engagement in community; identity formation through closer ties with community; fostering relationships, including closer connections with elders; providing safe spaces within communities; strengthened links to family and community; involvement in decision making within community; enhanced relationships of trust within community; and, meaningful engagement in things that matter within community (Britton et al., 2020). The development of these alternate models begins with community and is anchored by the important work that is undertaken within them (Lopes, Flouris & Lindeman, 2013).

The second paper, by Kilpatrick et al., (2020), speaks to the heart of community through an examination of an initiative developed to increase parents' ability to support their children's current and future education pathways. This initiative was implemented within Tasmanian disadvantaged communities and positioned parents to engage other parents within their own community to raise awareness, agency and outcomes for their children. Parents are particularly influential when it comes to their own children's choices about education pathways (Fischer, Barnes & Kilpatrick, 2017). Equally, rural children's educational aspirations are responsive to their location and socio-economic disadvantage (Gale & Parker, 2015). Additionally, the aspirations of Australia's rural youth are related to their attachment to their communities (Webb, Black,

Morton, Plowright & Roy, 2015). In these ways, community serves as a map to rural children and young people about where they want to go and how they want to get there. Kilpatrick et al. (2020) report here on the ways that their project combined these insights with customised program design (incorporating the use of community settings) to provide a compass to parents in order to contribute to aspiration setting.

The third paper, by Burns (2020), offers insights into the community building occurring within and through an academic community within its rural context. This paper provides a reflexive autobiographical narrative of the space exploring undergraduate engagement in a range of themes including an underpinning passion for teaching, extending an ethic of care to students and a commitment to follow the mentoring journey wherever the interaction led. This community-building endeavour focused its attention on a diverse range of priorities, products and outcomes, with academic community building being a product of students' participation, engagement, development, re-direction, responses and actions. Gathering data on the impact of these experiences, both from the academic mentor and the mentees, represents an opportunity to extend understandings of the social impact for those involved (Gershenfeld, 2014). Such programs are known to contribute to academic and other outcomes for undergraduate students, including rural students (Beltman, Samani & Ala'i, 2017).

In the fourth paper, Hudson (an advocate for rural education) et al. (2020) explore the opportunities and priorities for preparing preservice teachers for career entry in rural and remote schools. There is a need to provide pathways to get graduate teachers into these locations (Halsey, 2018) and targeted professional experience placements positively impact on preservice teachers' willingness to leave the city (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). These opportunities draw on important understandings about the positive contributions of social interactions between preservice teachers and members of the school community (Ledger, Vidovich & O'Donoghue, 2014). These are essential in establishing a sense of belonging and connectedness for preservice teachers (Andrews, 2011) and become influential in advice preservice teachers themselves offer to those thinking about rural and remote teaching pathways. Of the advice preservice teachers offered, they emphasised the importance of preservice teachers building relationships with their host communities (Hudson et al., 2020).

The fifth paper, by Bui et al. (2020) emphasises the need for ongoing, localised professional learning for regional, rural and remote teachers. Australian early career teachers are overrepresented in rural schools (Thomson & Hillman, 2019), and these teachers have complex professional learning needs (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin & Ferry, 2006). Many of these teachers grapple with the rigours of being new to the profession (McCallum & Hazel, 2016) while also attending to the associated challenges of teaching in small communities, including having to teach out of field (Kenny, Hobbs & Whannell, 2019). The opportunities that bring them to these rural schools often do little to enhance the work that they do once they arrive (White, 2019). Equitable access to targeted, high quality professional development is often a challenge for these teachers, with travel time to access these opportunities sometimes greater than the time spent in professional development sessions (Broadley, 2012). The small size of many of these schools also exacerbate the challenges, making it difficult for communities of practice to flourish (Bui et al., 2020). These factors combine to make it difficult for teachers to establish communities of practice in the ways that Wenger (1998) emphasised, through shared language, practices, objectives and activities that are central to their work. In response, Bui et al. (2020) promote the development of an online support system to establish a community of practice for regional, rural and remote mathematics teachers. This is intended to facilitate teachers' synchronous and asynchronous engagement across time and distance through a variety of modes and across a range of networks and activities that meet their individual, local and evolving professional learning needs (Trust, Krutka & Carpenter, 2016).

The final paper concludes the issue with a review of Bricheno and Thornton's (2016) *Crying in cupboards: What happens when teachers are bullied?* Burns et al. (2020) explore the insidious nature of bullying of teachers and problematise the phenomenon as one rarely spoken about. The realisation that bullying behaviour is originating from within the profession is difficult to digest, given our belief in community as a compass for our work as educators. Nevertheless, these behaviours are laid bare through encounters with teachers crying in their cupboards and experiencing declining health as a result of those who they would otherwise find community with and through. A possible explanation for this bullying behaviour is offered in the increasing performativity, accountability and external monitoring of education and the culture it promotes (Ball, 2003), related within this book to the rise and influence of Ofsted (Bricheno & Thornton, 2016). The antithesis of such deteriorating relationships between teachers is perhaps the collegiality and relationships sometimes found between teachers within remote schools (Jarzabkowski, 2003). Many early career teachers experience career entry as a difficult time as they are often left to rely on their personal resilience to overcome the challenges associated with remote teaching (Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). Related to this is the quality of relationships with teaching colleagues, school leaders, students and the broader community. These relationships are critical in relation to teachers' intentions to remain in or leave the profession (Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2015). Clearly, a breakdown in the interpersonal relationships between teachers and a separation from their community are critical factors in the recounts of Bricheno and Thornton's participants, reflected in their recounts about lives shattered and of failing health. Such recounts also resonate with the identity work of early career teachers as they attempt to make sense of their teaching selves amidst the complexities of their contexts, for better or worse (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Morrison, 2013; Pearce & Morrison, 2011).

As we look back on Volume 30, Issue 1 of the journal and reflect on the connections between regional, rural and remote education and health (Ledger, 2020), we are reminded that community provides the map for thriving education in these contexts. These intertwined themes of healthy, connected and thriving communities shape education and are shaped by it, therefore community shows us what is already known within these contexts and what to navigate with care. We also see that community provides the compass that reorientates the new and the established and the novice with the experienced. Moreover, community provides the anchor that grounds all within these places. This current issue emphasises the opportunities that our authors are taking to engage community in this important work.

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