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Editorial

Disruption, Diversity, and Dynamic Developments in Rural Education During COVID-19

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Introduction

Major disruptions occurred in 2020 that impacted all aspects of our lives. For many, challenges and opportunities surrounding education were central with many sectors and individuals globally responding in diverse and dynamic ways. The variety of disruptions – from fires, floods, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – resulted in unprecedented educational solidarity. Globally and across nations, jurisdictions learned from each other and provided support collectively. As executive members of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA), Western Australian Deans representative on the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) and Chair of the ACDE Network of Directors of Professional Experience (NADPE), as well as a co-convenor of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Rural Special Interest Group and a member of the Australian Alliance of Associations in Education (AAAE) Board of the Directors, we have witnessed the collegiality that occurred between universities, governments, education organisations, schools, and communities during this time.

This was particularly evident in how we responded to accreditation requirements for practicum within initial teacher education degrees and the widespread, sudden shift to remote teaching and learning. Although there were differences in how each university and state responded to the challenges, staff and sectors were open and willing to share their creative solutions. The responses were discussed with state registration authorities and educational sectors who all united to offer our preservice teachers flexible and creative alternatives without impacting workforce planning projections. This united approach within a higher education context is representative of how educational systems across the globe responded to the disruptive impact of COVID-19. Similarly, as most education systems moved to prolonged periods of remote teaching, the expertise developed in rural and remote education contexts was sought and new partnerships and collaborations budded. While this significant shift promoted new and creative opportunities across contexts and for students and teachers from early years through tertiary degrees, it also highlighted the gaps and inequity resulting from the disruptions in terms of

access to technology, professional learning, practicums, and specialised support for children with specific needs in rural and remote contexts. The international collection of papers within this issue brings examples from Canada, USA, China, and Australia that address these points.

We frame this editorial within a changing global discourse of what is rural. It is heartening to see the OECD has broad recognition that rural is a complex phenomenon, as has a growing body of academic literature. The OECD have recently developed a typology that sorts rural territories into those that are embedded into a metropolitan region, those outside but not near metro, and those that are remote from metro contexts (OECD, 2019). This focus on the degree of physical distance between rural and urban places, and the degree of linkages between the two, disrupts the traditional dichotomy of simply rural and metro. The OECD have also moved toward multi-dimensional objectives for rural policy focussing on wellbeing of rural contexts in terms of balancing economic dimensions, social dimensions and local environment elements. The OECD’s conceptual framework for the *New Rural Paradigm* (2006) and more recently the *Rural Policy 3.0* (2019) implementation process recognise that 1) rural regions have evolved into far more diverse and complex socio-economic systems, 2) government policies are less isolated and held to more accountability and 3) better data provide improved understanding and confirmation that rural contexts are not alike. This furthers ongoing debates on defining and accepting different types of rural and, in turn, place-based contexts (for example, see Roberts & Guenther, in press). Table 1 below shows the changing discourse within the OECD.

Table 1. OECD Rural Policy 3.0

	Old Paradigm	New Rural Paradigm (2006)	Rural Policy 3.0 –Implementing the New Rural Paradigm
Objectives	Equalisation	Competiveness	Well-being considering multiple dimensions of: i) the economy, ii) society and iii) the environment
Policy focus	Support for a single dominant resource sector	Support for multiple sectors based on their competitiveness	Low-density economies differentiated by type of rural area
Tools	Subsidies for firms	Investments in qualified firms and communities	Integrated rural development approach – spectrum of support to public sector, firms and third sector
Key actors & stakeholders	Farm organisations and national governments	All levels of government and all relevant departments plus local stakeholders	Involvement of: i) public sector – multi-level governance, ii) private sector – for-profit firms and social enterprise, and iii) third sector – non-governmental organisations and civil society
Policy approach	Uniformly applied top down policy	Bottom-up policy, local strategies	Integrated approach with multiple policy domains
Rural definition	Not urban	Rural as a variety of distinct types of place	Three types of rural: i) within a functional urban area, ii) close to a functional urban area, and iii) far from a functional urban area

Note: Retrieved from “OECD Regional Outlook 2019: Leveraging Megatrends for Cities and Rural Areas” OECD, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264312838-en> Copyright 2019 OECD.

The importance of the framework and changing discourse offered by the OECD can be seen in how it positions education within rural discussions on a global policy scale. Traditionally, rural development discussions often focused on siloed economic development with input from education often reduced to special projects or investments rather than integrated as a whole of policy approach. The articles in this issue offer insight into possible whole of policy approaches, specific needs, and creative practices of educators within rural and remote educational contexts.

The articles address responses to disruption, diversity and dynamic developments that are both inspiring and challenging.

Reading the global perspectives offered within these rural-focused articles provide opportunity for readers to reflect on their own practices and responses to critical areas of need impacting students, teachers, rural and remote schools and education policy. The majority of papers highlight the important role collaboration plays in achieving successful outcomes and reveals how teachers working as researchers and with researchers are changing local practices. These policy and practices are readily transferred into other contexts.

Three of the papers position teachers as researchers. Candy Skyhar from Brandon University in Canada examined teacher directed collaborative action learning (TDCAR) in K-12 classrooms in Manitoba with a numeracy focus. The team of researchers from Texas Tech University in the USA, designed a research experience for teachers (RET) professional development program for STEM teachers in rural areas that linked specialised knowledge and pedagogical practices to improve data science and cybersecurity offerings in the region. Researchers from Griffith University and Autism Spectrum Australia included classroom teachers in their research to trial two models of professional development designed to support the education of students on the autism spectrum. Classroom teachers responded in terms of appropriateness and effectiveness within rural and remote settings. The final two papers focus on students, those entering rural health practicums at university and those attending rural schools. Lisa Hall from Monash University in Australia reflects on the process for students pursuing a rural health pathway in their studies in the midst of a public health emergency. The Rural Health Bendigo cohort model offers rural educators an alternative approach to clinical placements that combine simulation labs, clinical skill development, and rural health experts. Mike O'Connor from Dulwich College Suzhou, Jiangsu in China analyses student attendance rates in Queensland state secondary schools to highlight the importance of school climate and culture as a contributing factor to school attendance.

This collective group of articles across nations and programs are united in their focus on collaborative endeavours, reflective practice, and teachers as researchers. Each of the papers also define rural differently; John Guenther uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifications; Candy Skyhar discuss rural in terms of geographic distances between communities and schools as well as between communities and urban centres; Faith Maina, Julie Smit and Abdul Serwadda simply refer to overall geographic distance in rural areas; Libby Macdonald, Wendi Beamish, Annalise Taylor, Emma Gallagher, and Ainslie Robinson define regional and rural areas in terms of relative distance from urban centres and their unique characteristics of the locations; and Hernan Cuervo in his review refers to the description offered by Looker and Bollman who demarcate between small remote rural, rural, and rural close to metro. This integrated approach to rural policy initiatives and the differing definitions of rural align to those proposed in OECD's *Rural Policy 3.0*.

Structure

This issue includes our rural connections piece by John Guenther, a book review by Hernan Cuervo, and an international collection of papers from researchers in Canada, USA, China, and Australia.

Our rural connection piece by John Guenther provides a unique personal perspective on how COVID-19 impacted his professional life as a researcher and educator. He uses the metaphor of *pushing the pause button* to reflect on his daily life and professional practices as a rural education researcher. His positive outlook and future-focussed insight offer possibilities in terms of reimagined work practices for researchers in rural education and collaborative research opportunities. John draws from a strong experiential base; he has lived in the Northern Territory for almost 20 years and is a highly accomplished researcher in the field. The framing of his reflections highlights his positive and practical approach to life experiences. He found time to

write, enjoyed the level playing field of online engagement, highlighted the inequities faced by communities, offered more effective ways of working with rural and remote communities, and significantly, saw the pandemic in terms of opportunity, productivity, and possibilities.

Australian researchers from Griffith University Libby Macdonald, Wendi Beamish, and Annalise Taylor join Emma Gallagher and Ainslie Robinson from the Autism Spectrum Australia to report on their study premised on the fact that the experiences of regional and rural teachers supporting students on the autism spectrum in their classrooms often differ from those of their metropolitan counterparts. They define rural in terms of relative distance from urban in a similar way to that of the recently changed OECD definition. Interventions designed for metropolitan settings may not work in regional and rural classrooms and teachers outside major centres may encounter different challenges in accessing appropriate resources and professional development. This paper examines the experiences of regional and rural teachers who were introduced to two models of practice designed to support their decision making with respect to supporting students on the autism spectrum. The paper is part of a larger study funded by the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC). It involved the implementation of the Early Years Model of Practice (EY-MoP) underpinned by the *Belonging, Being and Becoming* themes embedded in the Early Years Learning Framework and the Middle Years Model of Practice (MY-MoP) specific elements of *Rigour, Relevance and Relationships* (Test et al., 2014) in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (Beamish et al. 2020). Their findings specific to non-metropolitan schools reinforced the need to embed inclusive support for students on the spectrum in foundational teaching practices so that they can be adopted and adapted to diverse classroom contexts. The study highlighted the importance of giving careful consideration to context when selecting appropriate supports and that for these supports to be viable, they need to be flexible and adaptable. The EY-MoP and MY-MoP provide foundational support for teachers working in regional and rural areas.

Researchers Faith Maina, Julie Smit, and Abdul Serwadda from Texas Tech University describe a novel research experience involving five professors, nine teachers, and five graduate students. Known as a research experience for teachers (RET), the professional development program ran over six weeks in a summer-intensive mode and was funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Its aim was to provide a research-rich learning environment in data science and cybersecurity for STEM teachers in the regions because of the severe shortage of qualified personnel in the field (Muro et al., 2017). The initiative was designed in response to the geographic and professional isolation of STEM teachers in rural areas which often results in a lack of resources and difficulty initiating innovative science projects within their classrooms. The discourse analysis utilised within a situated perspective examined teacher reflections and artifacts to discover how they assimilated disciplinary knowledge of data science and its application to cybersecurity as well as how they transferred this into their rural curriculum. Their study revealed core themes that may be transferable to other discipline inquiries: ways of being a data and cybersecurity science, ways to apply and integrate concepts into STEM curriculum, ways of collaborating as scientists, and challenges pertaining to transfer. Their recommendations call for an integrated approach to upskilling rural STEM teachers by exposing them to sound, well-designed research driven professional development (RET) which combines discipline-specialised knowledge paired with sound pedagogical approaches. They promote this integrated approach as an effective strategy to build a STEM pipeline in rural schools. Their findings evidence the importance of linking theory and practice for practical and effective professional development.

In Canada, Candy Skyhar from Brandon University examined the use of teacher-directed, collaborative action research (TDCAR). She explored its role as a mediating tool for teacher learning within a professional development initiative known as the Numeracy Cohort. The PD initiative brought together a dozen K-12 teachers from across a very small (but geographically distanced) school division in Manitoba, Canada. In addition to learning about several strategies

for teaching mathematics and improving student numeracy skills, the teachers in the Numeracy Cohort engaged in collaborative action research projects, designing materials, and implementing new strategies in their unique, often multi-grade, rural classrooms. In addition to the changes and improvements noticed by teachers through their collaborative action research, findings from the study illustrated several strengths of TDCAR, including the autonomy it afforded teachers to engage in work directly related to their classroom contexts, its ability to foster collaboration between colleagues, and its ability to build connections across schools within a diverse rural context. Findings from the study also suggested that consideration should be given to both ways of supporting the action research process, and the complexities of facilitation in rural settings if TDCAR is to be used as a mediating tool for learning.

The aforementioned articles featured teachers as researchers while the following two focus on students. Mike O'Connor from Dulwich College Suzhou in China calls for a more forensic approach to analysis of school climate and culture to determine factors contributing to student attendance. Mike's Queensland study investigated three demographic factors and their contribution to attendance rates – the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), proportion of Indigenous students in the school, and the school population size. These independent variables were mapped against the calculated three-year average. He found that attendance rates were declining rather than improving with large scale policy improvement initiatives designed and adopted, reports conducted, and a range of recommendations made to government have had limited impact, particularly those in Indigenous schools (Ladwig & Luke, 2014). However, identified rural and provincially located schools have found solutions such as engaging families and communities, extrinsic reward strategies, and local innovations. These positive approaches have proven highly effective in maintaining good student attendance outcomes (Baxter & Meyers, 2019). He calls for school leaders and policy makers to engage in localised, individual studies of rural schools and analyse the strategies that help them overcome challenging circumstances, yet still attain high levels of attendance. Partnership between home, school, and community is highlighted as being a significant factor attributing to increased school attendance (Hamlin, 2020).

Lisa Hall from the Monash Rural Health centre in Bendigo regional Victoria focuses on students and those enrolled in rural practicums. She presents a successful modified rural clinical pathway strategy employed during the pandemic. Although medical education programs have reported on how they navigated their way around placements in response to the global disruption (Torda, 2020), placements in rural settings were not included. The apprentice-based model presented by Hall combines access to rural clinical sites, rural health experts, state of the art clinical skills, and simulation lab within their country practicum. This study is part of a larger Educational Evaluation project that “explored the benefits, opportunities and challenges of studying medicine as part of a rural cohort during a global pandemic.” The paper acknowledges the agility of universities to constantly react and respond to distractions such as the pandemic, university guidelines, accreditation demands, travel restrictions, and technological access. The successful elements of the program included good working relationships, the relative safety of the rural area, targeted support with small cohorts and peer-to-peer collaboration. Lisa suggests that in absence of family and friends, students undertaking rural practicums depend on staff to support their emotional wellbeing as well as their clinical skill development. The importance of key personnel, processes and practices underpinning the continuity and sustainability of rural practicums is highlighted in this article. These elements are essential no matter what the discipline or profession.

Finally, Hernan Cuervo from the University of Melbourne presents a comprehensive book review of *Rural Teacher Education: Connecting Land and People* edited by Michael Corbett and Dianne Gereluk, Springer, 2020. He begins by explaining how the book “interrogates the multiple intersections between people, land, rural spaces and education in Canada.” He describes how the book is divided into three sections of rural education in Canada, rural identity and relationality,

and place-based and land-based pedagogies. Hernan reflects on how the book challenges his concept of rural education in terms of research practice and philosophy (Cuervo, 2020). He highlights the book's contribution not only to rural education, but also for the disciplines of rural studies and Indigenous education and schooling. His review is reflective and comprehensive, providing a synthesis of the chapters' insights regarding global conceptual findings including the need to problematise the idea of community, interrogate place-based education not just as location but also a resource, rethink educational justice, and explore how we can successfully 'grow our own' rural teachers from rural contexts. Hernan agrees with the authors in their quest to counteract the deficit view of rural education by establishing the distinctiveness of rurality beyond metrocentric norms. Hernan's conclusion states that the book is diverse, complex, and rich in content which is exactly how we would rate his review.

Conclusion

The rural policy direction proposed by the OECD which supports an integrated multi-dimensional approach to working in rural and remote school contexts is reflected in the collection of articles presented in this issue. Specific examples offered in this issue include: the collaborative school/university research approach employed by Texas Tech University addressing data and cybersecurity in science; the autonomy and collegiality developed across school and rural connections focusing on numeracy in multi-grade classrooms in Canada; the Australian clinical health model that facilitates successful rural placements by combining local experts, simulation, and best practice skill development; and the Australian request to adopt and adapt foundational teaching practices and inclusive strategies to address the needs of children on the autism spectrum in rural areas.

In summary, the articles in this issue attend to the new rural paradigm discourse of the OECD calling for an integrated approach to rural policy and practices. Although diverse in content and context, the papers are common in their call for collaborative and adaptive responses to issues impacting students and teachers in rural, regional and remote settings. The adaptations and responses to natural disasters, political distractions, and geographical diversity help to build resilience across the field. The key concepts embedded in these papers are widely transferable and adaptable, providing rural educators and researchers with several possible solutions, methodologies and potentialities.

Finally, as we collectively move forward from the shock of the 2020 disruptions and look to renewed connections and new collaborations in the field of rural education, so too is the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*. We are taking significant steps toward becoming Scopus listed, including securing DOIs for all of our articles. To help our authors and peer-reviews gain better recognition of their work, we have linked with Publons and the ERIC library. As we continue to grow our global impact, we are keen to expand our editorial team to reflect the increasingly diverse focus areas of our articles. If you are interested in joining our team, please contact Professor Susan Ledger, AIJRE Editor susan.ledger@newcastle.edu.au.

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