John Guenther
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Susan Ledger
University of Newcastle
susan.ledger@newcastle.edu.au

Editorial: Challenging Rural Stereotypes

Rural and remote students, schools and teachers are placed in stereotypical 'boxes' in ways that suggest they have problems that need fixing. The language that surrounds these problems are metrocentric biased and perpetuate persistent negative discourse (Ledger, Masinire, Delgado & Burgess (2021). For example remote First Nations students in Australia are often described as 'disadvantaged', 'behind' with 'poor' academic outcomes (Roberts & Guenther, 2021). Rural schools face 'obstacles to success' (O'Keefe, Olney, & Angus, 2012) that city schools do not. Staffing is often described as an 'issue' to be fixed: "*Australia's rural schools are still staffed with younger, inexperienced teachers, who do not appear to stay long*" (White, Simone, 2016, p. 41). And parents are sometimes blamed for a lack of engagement with their children's schooling (Lea, Wegner, McRae-Williams, Chenhall, & Holmes, 2011). While the metrics of the metropolis might support these views, the measures that determine the problematics of rural and remote education tend to place a veil over the ontological reality of what it means to *be* a teacher, student or parent engaged with issues of schooling for rural and remote students.

In this issue, we reflect on a historical AIJRE article by White, Lock, Hastings, Cooper, Reid & Green (2011) that introduces the concept of *Rural Social Space* to show the interrelated factors of economy, geography and demography of a particular place connected in and through social practice (p.4). We also read about three 'issues' for rural and remote students.

The first, from Mander and Lester, discusses sleep for boarding students from rural and remote locations in Western Australia. Many of us who have never experienced boarding schools might think this a little odd, perhaps because we have constructed our own stereotype of boarding school as regimented and disciplined spaces where 'lights out' means sleep. Interestingly while in Mander and Lester's study, students rated their sleep as 'adequate', they found that actual sleep times fell well short of what is considered adequate for adolescents. Boarding schools are often seen as the 'fix' for lack of access to good educational opportunities for people in rural and remote communities, but here is yet another example of problems that this fix creates (see more in our special edition on boarding, Issue 2, 2020).

The second article takes us to rural China where Zhang, Yu and Guo's study examines home-school cooperation in rural kindergartens. The article examines teacher perspectives and attributes that support cooperation with families. This is not an issue that is unique to China. As an example from Australia, in the Northern Territory, the government is investing heavily in a program called *Families as First Teachers*, which is designed to 'engage' parents of young children with the expectation that this will 'close the gap' between First Nations and non-Indigenous children, in educational achievement (see for example Page et al., 2021). Whether it does or not is

not of concern here, but what the Chinese study highlights is that it is not necessarily how experienced or qualified teachers are that makes a difference but it is the qualities they bring as teachers that makes a difference to home-school cooperation—and indeed (young) age and inexperience are not necessarily 'bad' for home-school cooperation, a situation that is mirrored in Australian remote contexts (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015). A 'good' teacher then, in a rural or remote context, does not have to be the same as a stereotypically 'good' teacher in an urban context.

Our Rural Connections article challenges yet another stereotype, which again comes from the metrics of the metropolis: girls in rural communities cannot (or do not) engage with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) studies. Clayton, Hawkins and Brandsema report on a small pilot study they conducted in rural Tasmania. Girls' participation in two 'taster' workshops made a profound difference to the way they thought about STEM. The girls found that they did enjoy STEM learning and could achieve good results. It changed their stereotypical perceptions about STEM. The authors conclude that challenging "*stereotypes in one area may encourage these girls to look more broadly at other norms and stereotypes, and encourage other young people to do the same*".

It is easy for even rural researchers, to fall into the trap of believing and promulgating false stereotypes about rural education. It is encouraging to see, in these three articles, a depth of critique that pushes back against the metrics and norms of the metropolis and sheds light on perceptions of teachers and students from rural contexts. The articles go some way to changing the discourse around rural contexts and building on the importance of rural social space (White et al. 2011). As rural education practitioners and researchers we must be reflexively mindful of the need to position research from the place of rurality so that 'rural and remote' is not just seen as a context for our work, but as integral to our work. When we do this, we can rightly ask questions about the labels and assumptions that are attributed to 'us' and then respond with evidence that more accurately reflects 'us'.

References

Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015). Building on "Red Dirt" Perspectives: What Counts as Important for Remote Education? *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 44*(2), 194-206. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.20

Lea, T., Wegner, A., McRae-Williams, E., Chenhall, R., & Holmes, C. (2011). Problematising school space for Indigenous education: teachers' and parents' perspectives. *Ethnography and Education, 6*(3), 265-280.

O'Keefe, K., Olney, H., & Angus, M. (2012). *Obstacles to success: Indigenous students in primary schools*. Retrieved from http://www.appa.asn.au/reports/Obstacles-to-success.pdf

Page, J., Murray, L., Niklas, F., Eadie, P., Cock, M. L., Scull, J., & Sparling, J. (2021). Parent Mastery of Conversational Reading at Playgroup in Two Remote Northern Territory Communities. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. doi:10.1007/s10643-020-01148-z

Roberts, P., & Guenther, J. (2021). Framing Rural and Remote: Key Issues, Debates, Definitions, and Positions in Constructing Rural and Remote Disadvantage. In P. Roberts & M. Fuqua (Eds.), *Ruraling Education Research: Connections Between Rurality and the Disciplines of Educational Research* (pp. 13-27). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

White, S. (2016). A Road Less Travelled: Becoming a Rural Teacher Educator. In A. K. Schulte & B. Walker-Gibbs (Eds.), *Self-studies in Rural Teacher Education* (pp. 37-54). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

White, S., Lock, G., Hastings, W., Cooper, M., Reid, J., & Green, B. (2011). Investing in Sustainable and Resilient Rural Social Space: Lessons for Teacher Education. *Education in Rural Australia, 21*(1), 67-78.