



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## Educating for Cultural Sustainability

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As we hurtle into the twenty-first century our changing world places ever-increasing responsibilities on educators. To better focus the intent of this AIJRE Special Issue, *Educating for Cultural Sustainability*, we need to consider the connection between culture and sustainability, and the role played by education.

The importance of sustainability, decision-making and acting in the present to ensure that resources are still available in the future, has been well accepted since before the turn of the twenty-first century. Equally important is the need for educators to take a sustainability worldview, “*seeing and engaging with the world through a lens of sustainability*” (Nodlet, 2015, p. 10). Taking such a view into learning situations helps our future citizens to better appreciate the impact on others, both now and in the future, of their decisions and behaviour, and thus enact a sustainable lifestyle to better preserve the finite resources that are available.

Despite the ever-present strong focus on the environmental aspect of sustainability, since the 1980s three pillars of sustainability have been in use: economic, social and environmental. These three pillars are used to assess whether development is sustainable, but are also useful to broaden our view of sustainability. However, with the turn of the twenty-first century an expanded approach to sustainability includes a fourth pillar, culture. A relevant set of beliefs, morals, and practices collected over time as human knowledge, constitutes a culture, which may exist at local, regional, national, or global levels. There is much diversity in the interpretation of culture and although culture is most commonly thought of as centred around a particular ethnicity, it may also be based on other foci, such as, religion, sport, music, art, or professions. Of particular interest to AIJRE readers is the culture of rurality and its relevance for rural and remote education. Complications can arise when one culture attempts to exist within, or even alongside, another, as evidenced in the abundance of refugees and displaced or dispossessed First Nations peoples.

Everyone has a responsibility to prepare future generations for living in our culturally complex world BUT educators especially must step up and take a pivotal role. For a particular culture to survive, the relevant set of beliefs, morals, and practices that has been collected over time as human knowledge, needs to be passed down through generations. Without such transmission a specific culture, like an endangered animal species, may disappear forever. By necessity then, the very continuance of a culture is dependent on its sustainability, and education has a key role to play in ensuring future generations appreciate the importance of cultural sustainability.

A ground-breaking Finnish qualitative study (Laine, 2016) that sought experts' conceptions of cultural sustainability in education focused on relevant educational values, goals and skills as well as practices, pedagogies and education needs. Importantly, a way forward has been flagged by the focus on a "culture as" (Laine, 2016, p. 55) approach and contributes to the development of a "cultural diversity storyline [which] refers to the recognition of the diversity of values, attitudes and material cultural manifestations" (Laine, 2016, p. 59).

Each International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education focuses on the global education community obligation to influence policy aimed at delivering equitable and socially just outcomes for rural students. With a growing awareness of the importance of cultural sustainability, ISFIRE2021 focused on the theme *Educating for Cultural Sustainability: Innovation for the Future*. Educator/researcher interaction was guided by six symposium threads: Preparing teachers for rural schools; Renewing Indigenous languages; Developing cultural responsiveness; Embedding learning in culture; and Building enduring partnerships.

The nine papers selected for inclusion in this AIJRE Special Issue provide the opportunity to share just some of the thought-provoking research and practice that was shared at ISFIRE2021. The first eight of these papers contribute to the academic focus of AIJRE, while the final paper contributes to the rural connections focus. For a broader coverage of ISFIRE2021 content please consider the abstracts at <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/isfire2021/programme/>, which we hope will help you to contact like-minded educators/researchers who can expand your worldview of educating for cultural sustainability.

Complementing these nine papers is a review by Robyn Henderson of a book reporting educational research and schooling across rural areas in eleven different countries in Europe. Readers are encouraged to rethink rural, in particular the importance of place. Importantly, the book draws together this diverse research and considers emergent themes.

The authors of the nine papers have worked diligently at expanding their ISFIRE2021 presentations into thought-provoking papers. They should be congratulated on the important ideas they have presented to extend and challenge our current sustainability worldview, from the perspective of the culture pillar. These papers have a truly international scope, describing educational developments in Canada, Spain, Bhutan, United States of America, Scotland and Australia.

Bringing new perspectives to curriculum is a challenging but effective way of transforming teaching, especially in working towards cultural sustainability. Heather Duncan, Jeff Smith and Laurie Bachewich report a case study, based in one Canadian rural elementary school and its community, to work together towards reconciliation and de-colonisation of the curriculum. The local cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatsiwin and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings of a good life were the basis of the infusion of Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, resulting in increased staff awareness of Indigenous culture, and more parental and community involvement.

Examining teaching practice and how it connects to culture, generally, and place in particular, can also contribute to such transformation. In an on-going in-depth ethnographic study set in three small rural schools in the Aragón region of Spain Cristina Moreno-Pinillos aims to identify which teaching practices are based on the relationship with context (place), both social and cultural. Of interest, is the role played by rural schools and how teachers can facilitate the inclusion of values, traditions, and cultures within the curriculum. Importantly, these practices demonstrate that the real value of place encompasses community relationships and interactions. There is a clear need for educational policies that allow teachers to follow a flexible and open curriculum.

Education in Bhutan has a unique focus on culture, with the Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) framework underpinning all education policies and decisions. Kaka Kaka, Nadya Rizk and Judith Miller report research designed to test how effectively the Performance

Management System, the only tool used to evaluate school performance, is fulfilling the intended goals of EGNH. Effectiveness was examined through the lens of the theory of practice architectures, which describes what comprises social practices and how they are shaped by the social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur. Indicators demonstrated too much focus on leadership and not enough on teaching, needing a change to better align with EGNH principles.

Changes in teacher preparation are essential to support change in teacher attitudes towards cultural sustainability. Dawn Wallin and Chris Scribe describe the creation the Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model on Treaty 6 territory in Saskatchewan, Canada, which aims to decolonise teacher preparation and support reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The partnership model, responding to the teachings of Nēhiyaw (Cree) Indigenous Elders, comprises four foundational constructs: relationality, ceremony, language, and child-centredness. Teacher candidates are encouraged to be free to be themselves and come home to traditional teachings; and their pedagogical growth and development as teachers is fostered with the focus on relational pedagogies, inclusiveness, and community.

Providing focused professional learning is also recommended to transform teacher perceptions. Dawn Wallin and Scott Tunison report on the findings of a meta-analysis of 11 case studies of public and First Nations-run schools in rural, remote and northern Saskatchewan, Canada. Each school was involved in the initiative *Following Their Voices*, a four-year professional learning cycle for teachers, with the objective to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Canada's colonial relationship to First Peoples means that the relationship between Indigenous families and the school system is fraught with mistrust and scepticism. Emerging from this meta-analysis were concerns related to collective responsibility, sustainability, and leadership.

An ongoing issue for rural communities is teacher retention and there is a need to better understand how this is interconnected with the rural spaces. Heather Williams, Janet Williamson and Carl Siebert report on a mixed-method study that collected data from a wide range of educational stakeholders in a rural region of the western United States to better understand their perceptions of retaining teachers in rural school communities. Leadership was found to play a critical role, importantly the relationship between rural education policies, leadership practices, teacher recruitment and retention. Recommendations are made to better support both mentoring and rural placements in teacher and leadership preparation programs.

More proactive assistance for teachers to develop a rural sense of belonging (RSOB) could help to retaining teachers in rural areas. Allison Wynhoff Olsen, William Fassbender, Danette Long and Kristofer Olsen examine how English teachers experience and articulate a RSOB, the relationship they have with rurality, while teaching and living in rural communities. Analysis of the teachers' stories adds complexity to the RSOB dynamic by attending to affective intensities associated with the teachers' daily interactions across ruralities. When RSOB is strong, teaching in rural schools was found to become less a matter of resilience and survival, and more about acceptance or acknowledgement, purpose, and value.

Language is an important part of culture and the status of indigenous languages is being prioritised. Ingeborg Birnie reports on a small-scale mixed method practitioner enquiry study to explore the use of blended learning approaches to enhance skill development in the Scottish minoritised indigenous language, Gaelic. The aim was to address concerns over the ongoing language shift from Gaelic to English. Pupils actively engaged in online learning activities had greater confidence and proficiency in Gaelic compared to their peers who did not use the learning-support materials. Importantly, there was an increased involvement of caregivers in the Gaelic homework tasks, supporting use of the minority language beyond the classroom.

Creating appropriate resources to encourage the learning of Indigenous languages is essential. Jaimey Facchin, Saskia Ebejer and Adam Gowen describe three case studies, each sited in a rural

primary school, that are part of an on-going Australian project to engage community entities in collaboration to produce cultural resources in book form. The analysis described provides a guide to increasing community engagement and collaboration by a broad application of the principles: Place, Relationships, and Communication. Nourishing Pedagogy, with the conceptualisation of Country as Teacher, a framework in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can learn from Country, is a crucial element of the project.

### References

Laine, M. (2016). Culture in sustainability: Defining cultural sustainability in education. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 7(2), 52-67. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dcse-2016-0016>

Nodlet, V. (2016). *Educating for sustainability: Principles and practices for teachers*. Routledge.