

## **Review of Contemporary Issues for Rural Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*Over the last three decades governments have invested large sums of money in rural areas in an attempt to address issues of educational disadvantage associated with cultural and geographic isolation. As part of a wider investigation into the effects of parent participation in rural schools, the researcher conducted a review of the literature to discover whether such intervention has been successful and to determine the current status of rural education. It appears however, that while on the one hand the issues have been granted a higher profile, there are many enduring issues and new issues have emerged.*

### **Introduction**

This review of the literature will help to determine the current status of rural education issues, and put into perspective the progress that has been made by successive governments and government agencies in addressing dilemmas associated with the delivery of education in rural areas.

Rural communities have been burdened by negative, naive or romantic images. These became established in the early 1800s through poetry, paintings and stories. Terms still in common usage in Australia such as 'bush-wacker' and 'bush-lawyer' are often less than complimentary about rural character. These images of bush life and bush people are still reflected in popular culture through films such as 'Crocodile Dundee' (Walton, 1993:19). Furthermore, stereotyped media images of rural Australia where citizens are depicted as naive country folk unable to compete favourably with their city-slicker cousins (Crowther, Postle & Walton, 1989; Sher & Sher, 1994) still have some currency. The term 'bush' itself is often used in the popular press instead of 'rural' or 'rural areas'; for example, on January 11, 1999, the Sydney Morning Herald's banner headline read, 'Heroin blights the bush' (Jopson, 1999: 1).

The inference that rural life is in some way deficient in comparison to urban life is common. In terms of the delivery of education in rural areas, this attitude resulted in rural schools being treated unequally (Walton, 1993). Inequality in the life chances of children growing up in culturally and geographically isolated environments was clearly evident (Wong, 1994) with rural public schools being shaped by the 'deleterious effects of ... cultural isolation' (Wong, 1994:257). Disadvantages experienced by rural children, compared with their urban cohort, arose from their difficulty in accessing a range of cultural activities, urban experiences and employment opportunities. There was also greater difficulty in attracting teachers to rural schools. As a result, rural schools and rural communities continued to be disadvantaged and discriminated against (Country Education Project, 1990).

### **Equity and Social Justice**

Australians have a deep sense of fairness and acknowledge the importance of addressing issues of equity. For example, Jencks (1972) said of the American population that, while they [the general population] "accept inequality in virtually every sphere of day-to-day life, they still believe in what they call equal opportunity. By this they mean that the rules determining who succeeds and who fails should be fair." The Australian literature reflects a similar view (NSW Department of Education's Managing the School 1984; Rural Schools Plan, 1989; Schools as Learning

Communities, 1995; New South Wales Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs' Excellence and Equity, 1989; Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools, 1989).

Since 1977, however, the Country Areas Program (CAP), (initially piloted as the Disadvantaged Country Areas Program), has provided funds to assist rural schools to conduct projects to overcome the disadvantages of geographic and cultural isolation (Mason & Randall, 1992). It came into existence as a result of the recommendations of the Australian Commonwealth Schools Commission Report (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973) [commonly referred to as The Karmel Report]. It showed that there was considerable disparity in the provision of education to students in some sectors of the community. It advocated a principle of positive discrimination and compensatory education for disadvantaged groups. In particular, it emphasised a need for the provision of quality, equal and relevant education to rural students. As a result, the Labor Government (1972-1975) embarked on 'an unprecedented expansion in expenditure in education' (Macmillan, 1977:3) to ensure equality of opportunity.

In 1982 CAP's 'pilot' status was removed and the Country Areas Program became a separate entity. It reflected a change of rationale from concern with rural and socio-economic disadvantage to a concern which centred upon specific issues in rural education, such as cultural and social disadvantage, which stemmed from the effects of geographic isolation.

The three main aims of the Country Areas Program outlined in The Commonwealth Programs For Schools Administrative Guidelines (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1983:58-61) were:

*to help alleviate the substantial and persistent educational disadvantage of many country children and their families which stems from restricted access to social, cultural and educational activities and services'; 'to develop better ways of delivering educational services to students in country schools'; and, 'to provide a framework within which school communities and country people can work co-operatively to improve education opportunities for country children.*

The guidelines (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1983:58) stated that:

*The Country Areas Program is a response to the need to provide additional resources to help overcome educational disadvantage in many country areas. This disadvantage may stem not only from social and climatic conditions, but also from the physical isolation and small size of many rural communities which, in turn, make it difficult and costly to establish and maintain high quality educational services and to provide many students with the social, cultural and pre-vocational experiences they will need if they are to have the same opportunities as students in larger urban areas.*

### **Addressing Social Justice**

Despite the intervention, through successful equity schemes such as the Country Areas Program, and the injection of public moneys into rural schools (Henry, 1989), the literature revealed that students in rural areas were still not achieving the same level of outcomes as those in urban schools (Doecke, 1987; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). This situation was seen to be so serious that the New South Wales Government (1990:4) in its New South Wales Education Reform Act 1990 made the following provisions in regard to its enactment:

*(i) recognition of the special problems of rural communities, particularly small and isolated communities.*

The enduring education and equity issues challenging rural schools and communities were identified in the literature as:

#### **Resources**

Rural schools are under-resourced. They have a lack of staff continuity. There is a perceived difference in the quality of rural compared with metropolitan education (Education Commission of New South Wales, 1984; Crowther, Postle & Walton, 1989; Sher & Sher, 1994).

### **Educational Outcomes**

Rural students are underachieving (Crowther, Postle & Walton, 1989; Henry, 1989; Ministerial Review of Schooling in Rural Western Australia, 1994; Young, 1997; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

### **Teachers in Rural Schools**

Teachers are often young and are ill-equipped, inexperienced and ill-prepared. Often they are unwilling to teach in rural areas and have stereotyped negative attitudes to rural areas and students. Teachers have low expectations for rural students. Schools experience unnecessary teacher mobility and have inadequate access to staff development opportunities. Rural schools are difficult to staff (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990, 1991; Crowther, Postle & Wallon, 1989; Walton, 1993; Ministerial Review of Schooling in Rural Western Australia, 1994; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

### **Curriculum Provision**

Rural schools have restricted options and limited choice, particularly in secondary education. The curriculum is often viewed as irrelevant with urban-based content, urban teaching and learning strategies and urban information structures (Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools, 1989; National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990, 1991; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

### **Students**

Students have limited access to social and cultural choices and experiences; educational service centres; vocational role models; personnel and resources; supporting institutions (e.g. day care facilities); work and vocational experiences (Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools, 1989; Crowther, Postle & Walton, 1989; NSW Federation of School Community Organisations, 1995; National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1996; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

### **Retention and Participation Rates**

Rural students have a tendency to leave school earlier. For example, rural retention rates in Victoria in 1989 were 52.7%, compared to 60.4% for metropolitan students (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000:8).

### **Access To School**

For many rural students, accessing their school, or even accessing distance education facilities involves lengthy periods of travel. Secondary students are sometimes faced with the choice of staying in their rural community and accepting a limited curriculum at their local school or moving away to a large centre which may have broader options (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

### **School Size**

The perception that small schools cannot deliver an education of equal standard to a large school is difficult to overcome (Barker & Gump, 1972; Meyenn, 1985; Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools, 1989; Sher & Sher, 1994).

### **Rural Identity**

There is a conflict between rural values and culture of the school and its community and that of the teachers' urban, middle class values. The Department of School Education (1992) in its Annual Report, dedicated only one page (out of 136) to rural education (Sher & Sher, 1994; Gonzalez & Blanco, 1996).

### **Definitions of Rurality**

Few issues have bedevilled analysts and planners concerned with equity in rural education more than the complex question of what actually constitutes a 'rural' location (New South Wales Country Areas Program, 1991; Griffith, 1994; Sher & Sher, 1994).

For too long rural schools were seen as 'the problem'. Policymakers attempted to implement one-best system model which did not always recognise the unique characteristics or circumstances of rural schools (Doecke, 1987; Henry, 1989; Sher & Sher, 1994). Doecke (1987), for example, criticised and rejected many social justice programs in rural education because they were based on the 'deficit' model (Ankrah-Dove, 1982), which looked at what rural schools and their communities

lacked rather than building on the positive features that are summarized below. Hence, responding to a perceived 'need to overcome this inferiority complex that there is something wrong with being at a school in rural areas' (Meyenn, 1989:291-295), schemes such as CAP aimed to 'build on and identify strengths in rural communities' (Edgar, 1979:12).

### **Positive Features of Rural Schools and Communities**

To balance the reported challenges to effective rural schooling, the literature reports a number of positive features of rural schools and communities. Amongst these are:

#### **The School is a Community Focal Point**

There are strong school-community links; school-parent links; more community involvement; strong sense of community; the school is seen as a resource for the community and a local economic strength (Education Commission of NSW, 1984; Maroya, 1985; Queensland Government, 1994; Young, 1997).

#### **Schools are More Personal**

Rural schools and their teachers are seen as more welcoming with a stronger understanding of the needs of the community (Ewings, 1994).

#### **School Size**

Rural schools have smaller classes and therefore, can provide more individual attention (Meyenn, 1985; McSwan, 1996).

#### **School as a Community Resource**

The school is seen as a local economic strength and can provide a wide range of other resources (Henry, 1989; Squires & Sinclair, 1991).

#### **Rural Schools as Innovators**

Rural schools often have young and enthusiastic teachers who are accepting of educational innovation and furthermore, local rural communities are resourceful and creative (Sher, 1991).

#### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

Rural schools offer positive student-teacher relationships (Melnick, Shibles & Gable, 1987; Boylan, 1993).

#### **Student Achievement**

There is some evidence that students' academic achievement is equal to, or better than urban cohorts (Education Commission of New South Wales Listening and Responding - A Review of Education in Rural Schools in New South Wales, 1984; Ministerial Review of Schooling in Rural Western Australia, 1994; Young, 1997; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

#### **Local Loyalty**

Long stay rural teachers are satisfied and committed to teaching; newly appointed teachers adjust and enjoy the lifestyle; teachers are versatile (Crowther *et al.*, 1991; Ewings, 1994).

#### **Rural Schools Prepare Students to Bridge the Rural/Urban Divide**

Rural schools prepare students to function well in both rural and urban environments (Sher & Sher, 1994).

#### **Technology**

Technology is having, and will continue to have, a positive impact on the delivery of educational services to rural and remote communities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

It is of particular importance to note some conflicting evidence leading to a number of issues being identified in some instances as 'negatives' and in others as 'positives'. Table 1 captures some such examples.

**TABLE 1**  
**Positive and Negative Issues in Rural Schooling**

ISSUE	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Teachers	Young, enthusiastic	Inexperienced; ill-equipped; did not want to be in rural areas
School Size	Small and personal; individual attention	Limited subject choice
Academic Achievement	As good as urban; evidence of some excellent achievements	Below urban cohort
Curriculum	Possible information technology expansion	Few opportunities; limited subject choice; urban-oriented
Lifestyle	Pleasant lifestyle.	Few opportunities; lack of cultural and vocational opportunities.

This article will pursue the following issues in greater detail because they were the ones most often identified as key issues throughout the literature.

### **School Size**

There were divergent views expressed concerning the effect of school size on rural student achievement. Accordingly, in a review of research by Dr Jack Shelton in the United States, McSwan (1996:47-48) reported that in small schools, 'all students tend to achieve at higher levels, drop-out rates are lower, students are 3 to 20 times more likely to participate in curricular and extracurricular activities than students in large schools, students are much less likely to commit acts of violence, vandalism, or generally be disruptive', and 'small schools attract much higher levels of parent involvement and community support'. In addition, Howley (1996:30) found that 'West Virginia's small schools ... were doing a respectable job: they had nearly eliminated the negative relationship between poverty and academic achievement in grades 6 and 9 on average'.

### **Academic Achievement in Rural Schools**

Not entirely unrelated to the school size issue, was a continuing perception that rural children performed at a lower standard than their urban cohorts. Until recently, there had been little empirical evidence to challenge that view (Young, 1994:87). Early studies which showed low achievement by rural students (for example; Scott, 1969) contrast with recent findings that they performed as well as if not better than their urban counterparts (Education Commission of New South Wales, 1984; Melnick, Shibles & Cable, 1987; Ministerial Review of Schooling in Rural Western Australia, 1994; Young, 1994; Young, 1997).

A number of explanations have been offered for the disparity between research reports. One of these, for example, may be that 'what is being measured in studies of rural-urban differences is socio-economic status and/or ethnicity' (Young, 1997:1), not the effect of location. It may also be plausible to speculate that progress has been made in the intervening years through the impact of equity programs such as CAP.

When school location was examined in an isolated manner, it appeared that there were significant differences between performances of rural and urban students (Young, 1994). However, when other variables such as sex, race, socio-economic status and school size were taken into consideration, the location of the school did not appear to have as much influence on the students' performance (Young, 1994:102). Furthermore, Young (1994:87-88) cited research completed in the state of New York by Monk & Hailer (1986) and in New Mexico by Ward & Murray (1985), which

found that 'students from rural schools achieved as well as students from urban schools'. Although the results are far from conclusive, they do suggest that some generally held beliefs about rural student achievement are open to question (Young, 1997:1). Therefore the weight of evidence at present is away from geographical location as a sole determinant of student achievement and it appears that learning outcomes are related more to economic and social circumstances rather than community type (Young, 1994).

### **Participation and Retention Rates**

The literature indicated that progress had been made in improving rural participation rates (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990; Australian Education Council, 1992). But recent figures from Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000) - reproduced in Table 2 - show that the retention [to Year 12] of rural and remote students increased but has now fallen, more so than for urban students, increasing the already wide gap between the retention of these groups.

**Table 2**  
**Year 12 Completion Rates (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000:8)**

	1985	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Urban	47	71	69	67	66	67
Rural	47	64	62	63	62	63
Remote	36	58	52	55	51	54

### **The Curriculum and Rural Students**

Another matter examined widely in the literature with regard to the achievement of equity was rural school curriculum (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988).

Parents expected the curriculum to provide both a 'rural education' and an 'education in rural areas' (Clark, 1990:44). That is, not only did they require schools to have a well-rounded curriculum that was of equivalent quality and scope to that of urban schools and included literacy and numeracy skills, social studies, the sciences, languages, music and art (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988), but one that also addressed rural values, lifestyles (Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools, 1989; Crowther, Postle & Walton, 1989) and issues associated with the local context (Boylan, 1993).

The lack of relevance of the curriculum to country students was stated as one significant explanation for poor rural attainment in education (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973:19; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988). Although the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1988) acknowledged the contribution the Country Areas Program had made by promoting innovative practices to increase curriculum access, breadth and relevance, it stated that rural schools still had a curriculum with a distinct urban bias (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Walton, 1993). As Sher (1985:57) stated, 'rural children don't see themselves, their communities or their values in the curriculum, therefore rural life must not be important'.

### **Social Justice and Equity for Rural School Students**

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (1994:2) stressed that 'equity doesn't just happen ... we need a national strategy for equity in schooling as a framework for concerted national action - by teachers, parents, students and the community - to

reduce persistent educational disadvantage in Australia'. Therefore, intervention is needed if educational outcomes for rural students are to be improved (National Equity Program for Schools, Department of Employment Education and Training, 1994:8).

Some evidence suggests that progress is being made in addressing social justice in rural schools. McLean (1981), the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1988), Henry (1989), Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (1994) all urged that any intervention focused on removing the disadvantages must include continuing efforts to bring schools and communities closer together. This could achieve a better understanding of rural values and culture and increase opportunities for parents and community members to become more equal participants in curriculum development and implementation. In this way isolation and other barriers to communication would be broken down, community resources identified and built on, and new networks created to ensure greater access and greater local control of essential delivery systems.

With advances in technology a new era in educational delivery to rural areas has arrived. These developments are assisting in bringing to an end the traditional view of isolation (McCormack & Jones, 1998) and provide opportunities to open up schools even further, with parents and the wider community empowered to access educational activities not previously available in rural areas (Workshop Reports, 1994:163). The benefits include: studying at home, rural school being able to offer a wider range of subject options, rural students not having to move away from their district to study at higher levels, lifelong learning possibilities, access to a greater variety of educators and the decreasing cost of software and hardware. Nonetheless, educators need to be made aware of the issues that must be addressed and not see technology as a panacea for rural education difficulties. Issues highlighted for consideration in the literature include:

- the most appropriate and effective methods of technological delivery for rural schools;
- centralised (urban-based) versus localised delivery;
- access to appropriate equipment;
- transmission and capital/ hardware costs;
- maintenance and replacement procedures;
- monitoring of student progress;
- availability of appropriate resources to support the technology;
- availability of infrastructure to access various forms of technology in some areas (for example, fibre optic cable);
- the 'TV' teacher's understanding of rural issues (Boylan & Hemmings, 1993; Porter, 1997).

## **Conclusion**

Equity programs, such as the Country Areas Program, have 'had a significant positive impact on the equality of rural schooling' (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990:v) by genuinely supporting, encouraging and addressing the provision of education in rural communities (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Crowther, Postle & Walton, 1989; National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). According to Stafford & Lloyd (1993:75) the Country Areas Program played a significant role in supporting the:

- development of a range of appropriate curriculum materials and programs;
- professional development of teachers from rural areas;
- sharing strategies used by rural schools to improve education programs;
- community's participation in and understanding of education;
- use of technology for improving access;
- access by students to an improved range of educational experiences.

The basis of its success was in the delivery of programs and projects that addressed issues facing rural education; that is, involving, engaging and utilizing the skills of parents and community; addressing issues of limited choice and access to services and activities; building on the strengths of communities; improving teachers' skills by assisting them to share ideas; and, using technology.

Nonetheless, Sher (1985), Dawkins & Kerin (1989) and the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1991:xi) acknowledged that opportunities to access educational options were still more difficult for rural students because of inhibiting factors associated with their location. Furthermore, in 1995, the National Strategy for Equity in Schooling (NSES) (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1995:71) identified six categories of student 'whose participation and range of educational outcomes are significantly lower than those for the population as a whole, and who require additional support and resources to improve their educational outcomes'. One of those categories was 'students who are geographically isolated'.

Although there have been many advances in the delivery of education in rural areas, there are still many unique and enduring issues. Therefore, governments and policymakers must not be allowed to become complacent about educational delivery in rural areas. They must be encouraged to address the issues of cultural isolation which still hinder educational progress in rural areas. Moreover, they must continue to acknowledge the pivotal contribution of rural areas to our culture and economy (Queensland Government, 1994). To address these challenges needs more than money, it needs a change of attitude. Doecke (1987:33) suggested that it was very easy to argue that the cause of 'some kind of lack of achievement or opportunity is the result of where one lives, when in fact it is related to a much more complex set of features'. More than 20 years ago, Edgar (1978:44) stated that 'much of the discussion on educational disadvantage has been misleading for policy purposes because it has stressed the individual rather than social structures, deficits in family background rather than systemic problems and curriculum content instead of political processes'.

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