

Responding to Isolation and Educational Disadvantage

Don Squires

Abstract

A good deal of the rural education literature from the twentieth century routinely associates geographic isolation with educational disadvantage. As analyses have become more sophisticated, more attention has been given to the understanding of differences and specific needs exhibited by isolated communities and of ways of responding to these in a more focused way. This paper will provide a way of conceptualising the relationships between components of isolation (the concrete, tangible and actual, as well as the subjective, perceptual and constructed) and will examine ways in which various responses to isolation can impact on educational practices and outcomes. The paper will argue that there is, within this matrix of responses, a 'sweet spot' or optimal site for educational interventions that are designed to address disadvantage.

The Conceptual Landscape

Carter (1999:1) drawing on US research and experience, points out that "Teaching and learning happen within the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic contexts of a particular 'place.' These contexts influence the opportunities students have to learn and what is expected of them." Carter goes on to argue that the interconnectedness of these contexts is not always sufficiently acknowledged in policy initiatives aimed at rural communities and that the 'messy, nonlinear complexity' of rural schools and communities is not always addressed by comprehensive, cross-disciplinary responses. There is a strong argument suggesting that policy and procedural responses pertaining to rural communities need to take into account the peculiarities and realities of rural communities as 'places'.

The most pervasive phenomenon impacting on rural areas in the state is change. Change comes from many sources. A paper by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia at the University of Tasmania (CRLRA) suggests that one way of understanding change and its effects is to analyse it in terms of the sources and nature of the change. In this CRLRA typology, the first category of change is that associated with **global trends**. Here, the main drivers are:

- a downward trend in world prices for agricultural and mineral commodities, reflected in a decline in producers' terms of trade

- technological change, such as increased mechanisation of farming, agronomic developments, adoption of new mining techniques, and improved communications
- changes in consumer tastes, such as the decline in demand for natural fibres and increased expenditure on leisure services
- changes in lifestyle, for example the increase in movement to the coast
- government policy changes such as lowering trade barriers, deregulating the financial system and increased regulation to protect the natural environment

Although agriculture and mining have continued to grow and have increased their productivity, their share of gross domestic product has declined from 24% in 1948-49 to around 8% today. This drop in the share of gross domestic product reflects the world's growing trade in value-added produce, and the declining value of primary produce (CRLRA, 2000:14, 15).

A second major set of changes is associated with changes in **social systems**, largely generated by deliberate government policy aimed at achieving microeconomic reform. These reforms are thought to have hit rural and regional communities harder than metropolitan areas. Amongst the raft of structural reforms having an impact on rural Australia are:

- reductions in trade barriers
- deregulation of the financial system
- reduction in assistance programs such as production bounties
- labour market deregulation, competitive tendering and outsourcing
- commercialisation, corporatisation and privatisation of government utilities and services
- national competition policy

In rural Australia, these changes have expressed themselves in decentralisation of management functions, with a resultant decline in population, threatening the threshold necessary to sustain other infrastructures such as schools, police and medical facilities.

Smith (2000) has analysed census and other data for rural and regional NSW in order to build a picture of the current position and likely directions of change for NSW rural communities. The analysis reveals the following broad directions for rural NSW:

- an increasing rural/urban divide. At the beginning of this century, about 54% of the Australian population lived in rural areas (46% urban). As we approach the end of the century the proportions are 21% rural and 79% urban. In the first 50 years of the

century, rural population declined by 39%. In the second half-century, the rate of decline was 57%. Not surprisingly, there has been a dramatic shift in the capacity of rural areas to make the sort of impact on the Australian culture that they were able to make at the beginning of the century. If the current rate of decline is maintained we will see, by 2050, a rural population that makes up only 12% of the nation.

- an increasing east/west divide. There are 133 rural towns or municipalities in NSW (outside Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle and the Central Coast). Of these, 54 have a population greater than 10 000 and 10 have populations exceeding 50 000. Only one of those towns greater than 50 000 (Wagga Wagga) is west of the Great Dividing Range. Amongst the 54 towns greater than 10 000, thirty were able to achieve growth rates faster than the average over the last 20 years. Four of these 30 (Lithgow, Dubbo, Queanbeyan, and Bathurst) are west of the Dividing Range. In the remaining group of 79 towns and municipalities, only 9 were able to achieve a growth rate higher than average. Of these, only three were west of the mountains. Forty-eight of these smaller towns lost population.
- smaller towns are generally getting smaller. Of the 48 towns losing population, 30 had fewer than 4000 people. Only 7 towns of fewer than 4000 were not losing population. Amongst the 57 communities serviced by a school that is part of the Country Areas Program, 38 (67%) are in communities too small for census data collection. In the remainder, all the communities have less than 4000 people and, of these, only 4 were able to record any population growth in the last inter-censal period.
- Australia's population is ageing. In the 20 years to 1996, population increased by 30%, but the 15 – 19 yrs age group increased by only 3%, whilst the 75 years plus age group grew by 105%. In small rural towns, the change in age spread is accentuated, with some towns recording declines of 45% in the number of 5 - 14 year olds.
- income levels for rural communities are well below the average for Australia. Of the 133 rural towns and municipalities, 65 are 20% or more below average household income and another 106 are 10% or more below average.

Research cited in a Productivity Commission report in 1999 shows that a significant proportion of country people feel that government has abandoned them, contributing to what Lawrence (1990) dubbed a 'dynamic of decline'.

There are also changes in **the nature of work in general** which have impacted unevenly across rural Australia. Increased casualisation and part-time work, the move to outsourcing and contracting out, a

move from blue-collar to service occupations (which are retreating from rural communities) and continued high rates of unemployment, particularly chronic unemployment are features of rural, as well as urban communities. In the more industrially and occupationally dense urban settings, however, there are more opportunities for workers to master the newly utilitarian and generic 'soft' skills – managing, working in a team, problem-solving, high level communications, adapting and coping – and to market themselves across a range of potential employment sites, almost as small business entrepreneurs. Opportunities to market 'soft' skills in rural areas are necessarily restricted.

There are changes, too, in **service levels** available to rural communities, or in the quality of still-available services. Reduced banking services lead to changes in spending patterns. The availability of health services can affect health and wellbeing and their perceived decline feeds the general atmosphere of pessimism about the future.

A cumulative effect of all these kinds of change can be that other changes occur that are related to **individual or group psychological or emotional states**. At an individual level, motivations to achieve positive change are associated with themes such as 'expectancy of success' (the individual both values the outcome and believes that it can be achieved) and 'locus of control' (the individual believes that they are responsible for their fate rather than at the mercy of forces outside of themselves). At the community level, there can be what Bandura (1997) has called 'collective self-efficacy', the collectively held belief that people who work together can solve the problems they face and improve their lives through collective effort. (This is sometimes referred to as 'capacity-building'.)

These ideas are closely related to the roles of **human and social capital** in facilitating necessary change. Citing Duncan (1999), Carter (1999) argues that:

Building community capacity for change requires developing stronger human and social capital. Human capital is embodied in individuals' skills and knowledge and can be created through educational opportunities. Social capital, embodied in relationships among people, includes the webs of information flow, social norms, expectations, obligations, sanctions and trust that make it possible to achieve particular goals. (Carter, 1999:2)

Social capital refers to those features of social organization that facilitate coordinated action and cooperation. It is the product of social interactions available for the overall benefit of a community-of-common-purpose.

A popular theme in contemporary rural education literature is the potential role of schools in the economic life of rural communities and in community development. Carter (1999) argues that schools have a pivotal ethical role in promoting ways of building community-based capacities in areas including:

- democratising of relationships, building trust, addressing inequities in power structures and involving all constituencies in decision-making
- supporting parents as agents of change for children
- developing new avenues for civic engagement
- identifying and building on cultural, historic and economic assets
- identifying and supporting technology use, including new and emerging technologies, as well as extant forms of technology
- identifying reasonable targets of opportunity for capacity building (for example creating school-based adult programs for needed skills)

This latter point is of particular importance in many isolated or marginalised communities. The disempowerment that can flow from geographic and social isolation (d'Plesse, 1993) can suppress democratic processes. Extended efforts may be required in capacity building among disenfranchised groups to increase participation and local leadership. (Carter, 1999)

In order to survive and thrive in challenging times, communities must draw on and combine resources or 'capital' of three kinds – physical capital, human capital and social capital. The amount of physical capital available to a particular community will depend on factors such as its location, economic circumstances, history and the like but, in any event, the resources and facilities of the school are an important part of what is available.

Human capital and social capital are closely dependent on learning and are clearly within the normal purview of schools as learning institutions. The links between learning and responsiveness to change are well-established. Adoption and change are learning processes during which people, individually and as groups, develop new knowledge, skills and values. By contributing to individual development of knowledge, skills and understandings schools have always been major contributors to the stock of human capital in the nation and in local communities. The contribution to social capital has been less direct and deliberate, often dependent on the enthusiasms of particular school personnel, or structures peculiar to specific communities.

A contention of this paper is that rural schools should be making explicit and coordinated efforts to develop and maintain social capital in their communities and that the times are eminently ripe for this effort to be made, given the arguments advanced earlier.

Social capital manifests in communities in the form of networks, norms, trust and reciprocity. These arise as a result of interactions and experiences associated with cooperative endeavours and motivations of mutuality. Social capital is a public good that enables a greater output to be produced from the stock of physical and human capital in a community. Better outcomes result when people use their knowledge and skills along with the knowledge and skill of others, through interactions which use networks, shared values and the commitment of others to the group effort. Kilpatrick, Falk and Harrison (1998) speak of social capital as 'a stock which accumulates through use. Its networks, norms and trust are self-reinforcing.'

Two major types of resources contribute to social capital. The first of these is comprised of (structural) **knowledge**: knowledge of roles and rules, of precedents and procedures, of the dynamics of social networks. Knowledge resources help us answer questions about to whom, when and where to go in order to get things done. The second group is about **identity**: the shared norms, values, attitudes and beliefs; the shared culture and sense of mutuality of purpose. Identity resources feed the commitment to act for community benefit.

Knowledge resources facilitate cooperation and collaborative action; identity resources predispose the group towards that action. Social capital gives the community a stock of knowledge and identity to sustain its capacity to shape its future.

The venue and the opportunity for school involvement in the development of social capital both arise through partnerships with local communities. The partnerships are a two-way street. They allow the school to meet its obligations in terms of cooperative planning and responding to local need, but they also allow the school to play an active role in community-building and the development of social capital.

A Suggested Approach to the Analysis of Isolation and Educational Disadvantage

Components of isolation

1. Physical isolation

Clearly, there are aspects of isolation that are concrete, tangible and actual. These are the sorts of things that feature in popular images of isolation – distance, space, separation, loneliness – and they obviously play an important role in shaping an individual's or a community's access to services and provisions.

Physical isolation could be seen to be made up of a number of sub-components, including:

- i) **Location.** Whilst it is possible to be isolated in a crowd, or in an urban environment, the popular perception of isolation involves a location that is physically distant from others, separated by physical barriers such as distance or terrain. In Australia, this kind of geographic isolation is a fact of life for many who live in inland areas, and for quite a few who live in areas near the coasts that are difficult to access. The contribution of location to isolation is generally well understood and accepted, so little more will be said about it here.
- ii) **Demographics.** Changes in the patterns of the composition and distribution of population in inland NSW were discussed above. These demographic patterns contribute to isolation. The stark scarcity of people is a factor. So too is the absence of a critical mass people of a similar age, or life stage or gender or common interests. Pervasive change in the demographics of rural Australia is an inescapable component of isolation for individuals and communities.
- iii) **Access to Services:** The availability of services or the ease of access to them is also an inescapable physical aspect of isolation. Services are either there or they are not. Populations tend to measure their isolation in terms of their ability to access services they require.
- iv) **Economic Capacity:** Individuals or communities with greater resources are better able to mitigate the effects of isolation. Whilst there is a subjective element to the measurement of 'adequate' resources, it is nonetheless true that the absence of resources is a physical and tangible barrier to participation in the sociocultural, economic and political processes of Australian life and a contributor to isolation.
- v) **Difficulties in Travel.** Peter d'Plesse (1990) coined the term 'resistance' to capture the various difficulties that people in some parts of Australia experience in moving around. 'Resistance' implies more than merely distance: it can accommodate the realities of terrain (mountains, unbridged streams, expanses of ocean); extremes of climate (floods, snow drifts, ice, bulldust); road conditions and time. The use of a term such as this enables us to more nearly equate the isolation of people in different parts of the continent. Dennis Griffith pursues the same quarry in his advocacy of a time/cost/distance unit as a component of his service access frame (Griffith, 2002).

2. Psychological isolation

Beyond its physical reality, isolation can manifest as a state of mind. These subjective, or perceived or constructed forms of isolation are as powerful in their effects as physical isolation. Amongst the factors that contribute to psychological isolation are the following (although within the catalogue there are obvious areas of overlap and interdependence).

- i) **Values, Attitudes and Aspirations.** Reclusive or exclusive values and attitudes may arise out of cultural affiliations or upbringing or attachments. Such values may limit an individual, or community, in its willingness or capacity to make connections with others. Values associated with limited aspirations or circumscribed ideals are also likely to be isolating, or at least to restrict the reach of individual or community contacts.
- ii) **Power.** Disempowerment can also be isolating because it restricts the capacity of the disempowered to break out of their milieu and to seek new contacts and networks.
- iii) **History and Tradition.** In some individuals and communities there is a tradition of self-reliance and independence that discourages help-seeking or intercourse with others. This can be exacerbated where the current situation of the individual or community is at odds with their historical position. For example, a community that was once powerful and successful and respected may be very reluctant to maintain its old levels of intercourse now that it is diminished and perceived as unimportant and irrelevant.
- iv) **Community Self-image.** Tied up with those historical changes is the image that the community now has of itself. Does the community perceive itself as cohesive, aspirational and successful or as dysfunctional and ineffective? The more negative the self-image, the more it is likely to encourage feelings of isolation.
- v) **Social Capital.** Social capital, because it is comprised of networks and interactions involving trust and reciprocity is a powerful antidote to isolation. Where social capital is limited, isolation is more likely to arise.
- vi) **Human Capital.** Absence of a depth and variety of human capital can also be isolating. To overcome isolation requires skills and competencies. Where these are absent or deficient, perceptions of isolation are strengthened.
- vii) **Leadership.** Community leadership can have a vital role in facilitating the development of relationships of mutual obligation and trust between community members and across community sectors. In the absence of effective leadership,

conditions conducive to perceptions of isolation may flourish. At the same time, the existence of a pervasive psychological isolation may suppress the growth and development of leadership in a community.

Interactions between Physical and Psychological Isolation

In reality, there are often inter-relationships between physical and psychological isolation. Perceptions of psychological isolation can be strengthened if they coincide with manifest physical isolation. Similarly, a sense of physical isolation can generate and nurture psychological isolation. Typically, 'isolation' as a phenomenon, is composed of a fluid mixture of both physical and psychological factors.

Structural Responses to Isolation

The existence and consequences of isolation are reasonably well recognised in a country such as Australia, at least to the extent that major social institutions have developed policies and structural responses to address the needs of isolated communities. For example, in the area of health and community services there are responses such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the Australian Inland Mission. The justice system provides travelling courts and circuit judges. In arts and entertainment there are subsidies for travelling companies and supports for local arts infrastructure and performance. Within the political institutions there are groups who specifically represent the interests of isolated constituents, there are tolerances built into the population size of electorates and it is not uncommon for governments to conduct parliamentary sittings or Cabinet meetings in decentralised areas. In education, there are mechanisms such as the Country Areas Program, Assistance for Isolated Children and the various Schools of the Air that recognise needs of isolated populations.

Despite these recognitions, the most significant institutional impacts for isolated communities will arise from the influences of embedded institutional attitudes and cultures. For example, if political institutions or service providers such as telecommunications or transport or finance and banking become committed to an ideology such as economic rationalism (formula economics) then they may convey to isolated communities messages suggesting lack of interest or concern. Institutions implementing notions of efficiency and financial accountability at the expense of 'customer service' may be perceived as uncaring and fuel perceptions of isolation from the 'mainstream' institutional life amongst isolated populations.

One way to gain an understanding of the ways in which institutional attitudes and cultures can influence policy and practice is to compare the operations of institutions in a highly decentralised state like Queensland with those in, say, Victoria or New South Wales.

These structural responses are important to a discussion of isolation and disadvantage because in many ways they shape the conditions under which physical and psychological isolation become significant. Where structural responses and institutional attitudes and cultures are (or are perceived to be) supportive of isolated communities, the impacts of isolation on communities will be mitigated. On the other hand, if structural responses are seen to be unsupportive or inappropriate, feelings of isolation may be exacerbated. When rural and isolated communities complain that they are not sufficiently supported or appreciated it is often their assessment of institutional and structural responses that lies at the heart of their unhappiness.

System Policies and Support Structures

Given that we are here concerned with perceived educational disadvantage, the policies and support structures of education systems will also be of critical importance. A system that is perceived as recognising the positive aspects of rural education and committed to enhancing the benefits enjoyed by rural students while at the same time focusing on their specific needs has the potential to mitigate isolation. Development of specific programs to support isolated schools and communities will strengthen the perception and the impact. Examples from state systems include incentives to attract and retain teachers, provision of specific support and consultancy services, programs to support rural families and provision of sophisticated communications technologies.

The Community's Responses to Its Situation

The extent to which isolation actually impacts on educational opportunity and outcomes in a specific community will inevitably be a product of all of the influences outlined above. Central to an analysis of any adverse impact will be two key sets of perceptions: how the community responds to the situation in which it finds itself; and how the school serving that community responds to its situation. These two sets of responses are heavily inter-related, perhaps mutually dependent.

A community that is, and feels, isolated and influenced for better or worse by structural and institutional responses and system policies and structures, can react in diverse ways. Some will be

overwhelmed by their situation and the paucity of their resources and will find it difficult to marshal reserves of optimism or commitment to positively address their situation. Others will, because of fortuitous economic strength, or good stocks of human and social capital, or other strengths, be able to transcend their situation and develop effective strategies to cope with isolation and not let it disadvantage them. The psychology and dynamics of the community will be closely related to the extent to which adverse isolation-inducing forces have been internalised and institutionalised within and amongst community members.

The School's Responses to Its Situation

In other cases, real or potential disadvantage may emanate from the school's responses to its situation in a particular community. If the school perceives its community to be depressed and unresponsive, or its prospects to be poor, or its attitudes to be negative, the reactions of school personnel are likely to be less enthusiastic and committed. Depressed outcomes and unrealised potential may flow as self-fulfilling expectations, perhaps driven by the effects of the overt or covert curriculums being enacted.

Thus the crucial dynamic to be considered in assessing the impact of isolation on educational outcomes is this relationship between the community's perception of itself in its place and the school's responses to that community and the self-image it displays.

The 'Best' Site for Intervention

Therefore, the most effective strategies for intervening on behalf of improved educational outcomes are likely to be associated directly with this inter-relationship. Intervention and extension practices initiated by school systems most commonly concern themselves with building the capacity of the school. Physical provision, levels of equipment, staffing and professional development for staff are all aimed at this end, and are obviously essential.

The contention of this paper, however, is that these measures will be of reduced value unless they are also accompanied by efforts to build capacity in the community, where analysis reveals that the community's own responses to its situation are contributors to the negative outcomes.

This presupposes that some process is in place to carry out the necessary analysis before intervention strategies are planned and implemented. This is not very often the case. What is required is a method of analysing the quality of the inter-relationship between, on the one hand, the community's

perceptions of itself and its responses to its situation and, on the other hand, the way the school responds to that situation and to those perceptions.

Different kinds of responses are possible. A community may feel alienated, dispirited and disempowered, but the school might feel confident and capable of implementing programs to achieve positive educational outcomes. In this case, the school's programs are likely to be adversely affected by community and parental attitude, unless they are accompanied by deliberate strategies to influence community morale and aspirations. Because there is likely to be little 'ownership' of the school's programs amongst community members, the implementation of the programs may serve to reinforce the community's powerlessness and perceptions of being isolated from significant decision-making.

In a second scenario, the school may accept the community's perception of low self-worth and limited aspirations, and design and implement programs that confirm and reinforce the community's response to its situation. There will be little incentive for community participation in the design of programs or in the development of collaborative strategies, since these will be seen as unlikely to bring about positive change. In this case, educational outcomes will remain depressed until there has been effective capacity-building at both the school and community levels.

In a third case, the community's positive view of its own capacity and aspirations may not be shared by the school or the school may lack the capacity to respond in appropriate ways to the expressed needs of the community. Educational isolation and disadvantage will remain a possibility, because the school is the major, but in this case ineffective link between the community and the broader social, cultural and political processes in which it wishes to participate. In this scenario, capacity-building at the school will help to bring about a situation where meaningful participation by school and community leaders in the development and implementation of effective programs is possible.

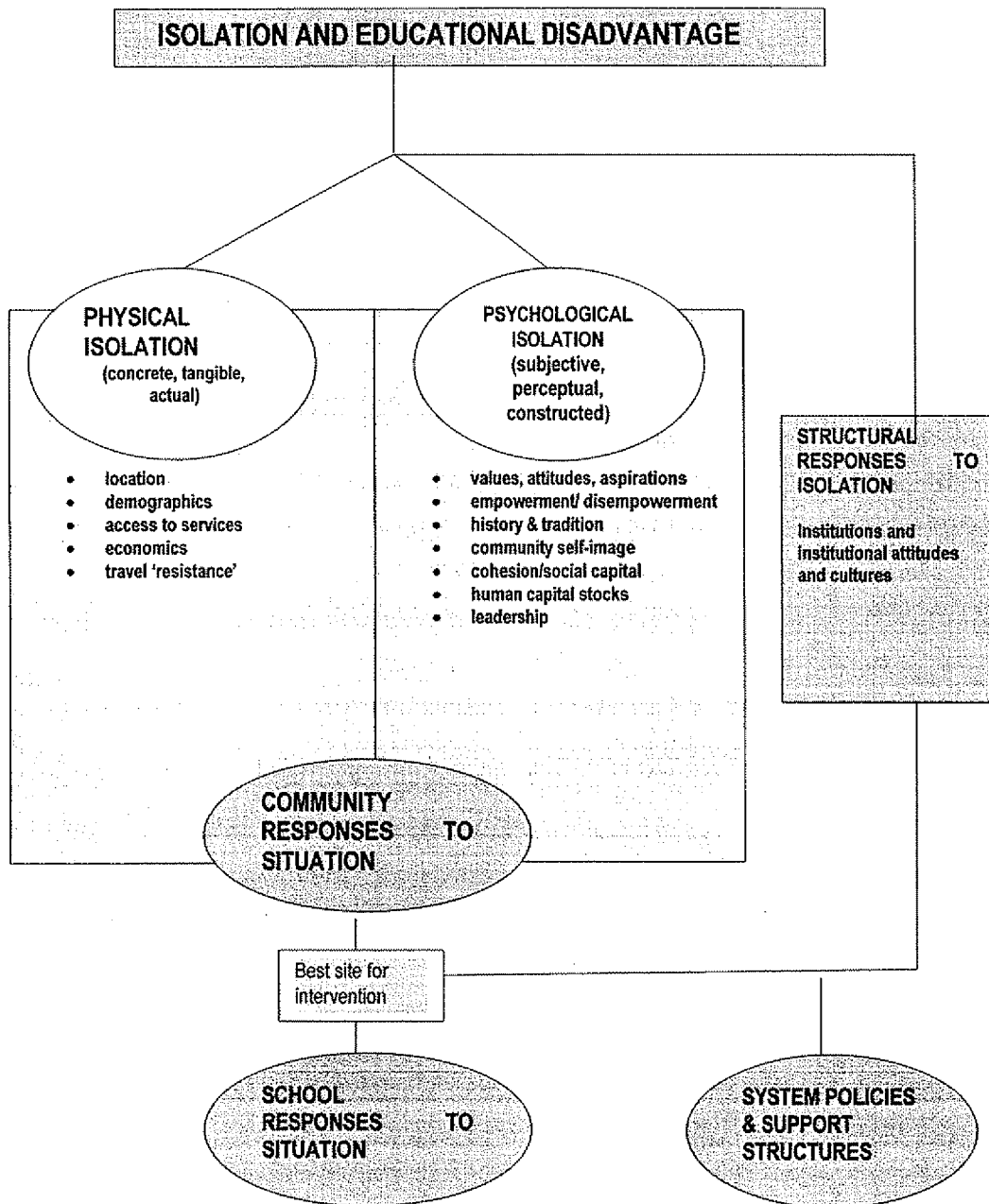
And so on, through the various combinations. Some of these possible situations are summarised in the table below.

		School capacity to achieve positive outcomes in this isolated community	
		High	Low
Community perception of its capacity to transcend isolation	High	Strategies and programs can be collaboratively developed and implemented	Capacity-building at school required before strategies and programs can be collaboratively developed and implemented
	Low	Capacity-building in community required before strategies and programs can be collaboratively developed and implemented	Capacity-building in both the school and the community required before strategies and programs can be collaboratively developed and implemented

In summary, then, this paper has attempted to give some support and direction to those who have an interest in responding to isolation and attempting to address its potential impact on educational outcomes. The paper has:

- touched on some of the contemporary literature relevant to this discussion and identified some key concepts that could inform policy and practice
- provided a framework for the analysis of contributors to isolation and of the ways in which isolation can impact on educational achievement
- suggested an appropriate locus for intervention by those interested in ameliorating the effects of isolation on educational outcomes
- suggested a broad framework for the investigation of factors relevant to the design of intervention strategies

The diagram that follows sets out the relationships between elements discussed in the paper.



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