

AUSTRALIA'S SUSTAINABILITY: A NEW POLICY FRONT FOR RURAL EDUCATION?

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ABSTRACT

Rural education and its policy agenda has for many decades primarily focussed upon responding to decline to 'keep things going; keep things open'. While this has been understandable and much has been achieved, it is now opportune – essential? – that rural education and its leaders embrace a new challenge, sustainability, and use it to pursue new policy fronts.

The 25th anniversary of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia is a timely occasion to consider this.

Five issues critical to national sustainability, and a program to engage city and urban youth in living and learning in rural communities, are presented to stimulate new policy and operational possibilities for rural education under the umbrella of sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Rural education has been, and continues to be, a challenging and problematic policy area for Australian governments. Essentially, rural population decline relative to regional, urban and metropolitan growth underpins this.

Focusing on how to provide education services for declining numbers of learners over larger and larger land masses involving greater and greater distances at higher and higher per unit costs, has tended to dominate rural education policy debate, discussions and development.

Whilst the response has resulted in significant innovation, such as cluster schooling, all-age schools, distance education and a plethora of staffing incentives, the sustainability challenges and opportunities facing Australia provide rural education with an ideal platform to play a pro-active role in the mainstream of policy development.

The following section outlines a rationale for expanding the policy front for rural education and the salient contextual factors associated with doing this. Perspectives on sustainability are then considered leading into discussions of critical sustainability issues and a *city-to-country* initiative.

RATIONALE AND CONTEXTS

Vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to the long-term sustainability of Australia, and so too are young people.

Stemming the decline of youth in rural areas is a major issue because youth are fundamentally future-oriented and are therefore a critical human resource for re-building and re-energising rural Australia's role in national sustainability. Salt (2004) asserts, "it is the loss of youth and the partial replacement of that demographic by

older people that is of most concern...[because] the structural shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of [its] vitality..." (p. 68).

The decline in the number of youth who remain in rural communities beyond school leaving age is a particularly striking aspect of the changes taking place in rural Australia, as well as many other developed and developing countries. Alston & Kent (2003) state that "[t]he lack of meaningful full-time work in rural areas is one of the main reasons for young people leaving rural communities" (p. 6). Limited post-secondary education and training is another significant reason for the exodus of youth from rural areas. Often added to this is a gender imbalance, where young females leave rural areas at a higher rate than young males. There are also challenges associated with the education of Indigenous youth so they have choices about their cultural identity, employment opportunities and personal fulfilment.

It is useful to be clear about the where, who and what of rural contexts when advocating the development of new policy fronts. There are both instrumental/quantitative definitions and definitions of a more nuanced and qualitative kind. These have also been referred to as the geographical approach and the sociological approach (Whitaker 1983; Mulley 1999; Hooper 2001). The geographical approach to delineating and defining 'rural' essentially focuses on size, distance and access to services. The sociological or qualitative approach on the other hand emphasises the essences of places and spaces.

Hugo (2000) argues that there is much confusion about the classification of the population of Australia that lives outside cities of greater than 100,000 persons. He states that a significant amount of this "confusion regarding rural, remote and regional stems from an attempt to combine into a single classification two distinctly different conceptual elements: urban/rural and, accessibility/remoteness" (Hugo, 2000, p.1). As these are very different concepts, Hugo (2000, p. 2) believes that "[a]ny attempt to classify non-metropolitan into rural and remote areas is misplaced". White and Reid (2008) propose two notions of rural as a contribution to improving definitional clarity: "one is the notion of rural as different from metropolitan: and the other is related to accessibility to services and remoteness" (p.3).

Coladarci (2007), however, in his 'farewell' article after 15 years as editor of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* asserts that "the problem is not an absence of consensus regarding the meaning of rural. Rather, the problem...is that rural education researchers in their reports and publications typically fail to describe the context of their research in sufficient detail" (p.2) to facilitate debate about possible new futures for rural education.

Given the focus of this paper, the rural and remote area determinations for government schooling provision are used to define rural contexts. They are based upon a blend of size of population centre and distance from either the capital city or a major regional centre (Jones, 2000, pp. 12-17). In the Northern Territory for example, "country consists of the whole Territory except for areas within a 75 km radius of Darwin and Alice Springs, the two urban centres with a population of 20,000 persons or more" (Jones, 2000, p. 17). By contrast, in South Australia (author's home state), eligibility for funding through the Rural Index commences when schools are located more than 80 kms from Adelaide, and for non-government

schools a rural locality allocation applies to schools more than 50kms from the Adelaide General Post Office (Jones, 2000, p. 15).

SUSTAINABILITY

In recent years, Australia's sustainability has emerged as a major national priority. Looking ahead to 2050 adds a sense of urgency to the pursuit of sustainability – it is estimated there will be an extra 3 billion people on planet Earth by then unless some cataclysmic event occurs (Homer-Dixon, 2006). Flannery (2008) argues that “[o]ur search for sustainability...[is] the greatest challenge we have ever faced” (p. 8).

Davison (2005) declares that “sustainability is not only an economic, demographic and environmental concept; it is also a historical concept” (p. 39). He also asserts that sustainability “is the newest addition to the lexicon of rural decline” (p. 38). Davison thinks about rural communities in Australia since white settlement in terms of five phases which underpin his emphasis on knowing and valuing the historical dimensions of sustainability – “rural communities themselves...often have long memories, kept alive by the all-too-tangible reminders of better times evident in disused or decaying buildings and faltering local institutions” (p. 39). The phases of rural communities in Australia according to Davison commenced when they were *planted* in the early colonial years. This was followed by the *water[ing]* phase when governments worked to support the growth and expansion of rural communities, then the *protect[ing]* phase characterized by special treatment to prop up their survival. The fourth phase (post World War 2) focused on *plan[nin]g* with an emphasis on decentralization. The fifth (and current) phase Davison calls *sustain[ing]*, characterized by rural communities having to deal with the impacts of globalisation and do more than just survive (2005, pp. 39&40).

In the rural context, sustainability is a complex concept and it has proven difficult to generate consensus in terms of definition and also its utility to motivate action (Cocklin and Dibden, 2005). Notwithstanding this, a particularly useful contribution to the meaning of sustainability is that it “refers to progress towards...preferred futures rather than an endpoint” (Cocklin and Dibden, 2005, p. 3). Pretty’s (2002) focus on sustainability and agriculture foregrounds human activity as central to understandings of rural and highlights “not damaging the environment” (p. 56). Goldie, Douglas and Furnass (2005) draw upon the Brundtland Report of 1987 for their definition: “the capacity of human systems to provide for the full range of human concerns in the long term” (p. 3). Their definition accentuates both survival and quality. Green and Reid’s (2004) thinking on sustainability goes further and reveals the human tensions inherent in it by arguing that “in essence it [sustainability] can be understood as living in the contemporary moment in such a way as to provide for an equitable and secure future” (p. 257).

Clearly there is diversity of thinking about the concept of sustainability, and the historical phasing underscores the complexity of the struggle by rural communities to embed themselves as a major force in the development of our nation. However, I see exploring new relationships between rural education and sustainability as having the potential to arrest, or at least influence, the continuing marginalisation of rural education in relation to contributing to Australia’s future. I

see rural education working with other essential human services like health and local government and the private sector to address the challenges of sustainability and, through this, reinvigorate rural education. Following her analysis of the possibility of “‘ordinary’ landscapes or communities within which we live, work and educate” to reinvigorate ways of shaping the future, Allison (n.d.) concludes that “sustainability immediately shifts the perception of ‘ordinariness’ of these...landscapes” (pp. 1 & 4) and opens the way to new possibilities.

Using Soja’s (1996) terminology, the challenge—the invitation—is to explore sustainability and rural education together as *Otherring*. Soja (1996) argues that the heart of *Otherring* is discontent with the constraints of binary thinking and an openness to move beyond and outside conventional ways of thinking. From this, “new spaces of opportunity and action are created, the new spaces that difference makes” which may result in insights about phenomena, from the very personal to the global—like sustainability—that might otherwise remain blurred, hidden, suppressed or oppressed (Soja, 1996, p. 98).

SUSTAINABILITY AND ISSUES FOR RURAL EDUCATION

With declining proportions of state and national populations, many rural areas are struggling to remain viable in relation to essential human services like education and health, in the face of rising costs per unit of services required (as defined by certain views of economic costings and benefits), and the pervasive impacts of globalisation on rural economies, amongst the most visible of which is a steep decline in the demand for traditional labour (McSwan, 2003). “Globalisation and the power differentials it creates have had a significant social and economic impact on rural and remote areas...[while m]ajor cities have benefited from the focus on the knowledge-based production that global capitalism demands, drawing in capital, people and resources” (Alston & Kent, 2003, p. 5).

From the impacts of globalisation on rural contexts and the continuing national and world population growth, there are five major issues around which rural education, in concert with others as previously named, might work to create new policy which promotes sustainability and enhances the viability and role of rural education.

The first issue, and probably the most pressing one, is food security. As Pretty (2002) argues, “[w]ithout food, we are clearly nothing. It is not a lifestyle or add-on fashion statement. The choices we make about food affect both us, intrinsically, and nature, extrinsically. In effect, we eat the view and consume the landscape. Nature is amended and reshaped through our connections—both for good and bad” (p. 11). Put another way, “will there be sufficient nutritious food available for nine billion people by the year 2050”? (Persley & Blight, 2008, p. 6). The majority of the food consumed daily in Australia is produced in rural areas. To illustrate: the Murray-Darling Basin, while comprising only 14% of Australia’s landmass, supports around 42% of Australia’s farms (Cullen, 2005). Producing food, even where it has ‘gone the way of high tech’, still requires large numbers of highly skilled and semi-skilled workers. Unlike mining, agriculture and horticulture are not as conducive to a fly-in/fly-out model of labour supply, even with the advent of agri-business.

Ensuring that Australia remains a country that is food secure is something which cannot be taken for granted. As Australia's population grows and changes over time and the impacts of climate change 'kick in', new problems and opportunities will emerge. These changes, and others that food production and distribution are reliant on, provide new policy development and program opportunities for rural education, rural educators and rural communities.

Secondly, much of Australia's energy is sourced from rural and remote regions. Looking to the future, non-fossil-based energy sources are likely to require large tracts of rural landscapes and coastal environs, and also human expertise to produce the new sources of fuel. Blakers (2005) argues that energy sources that underpin modern societies like Australia "must be made sustainable" (p. 109) and that "solar energy collectors which can be spread over a wide geographical area" (p. 111) is the preferred option to pursue. This development (as well as other forms of renewable energy) has huge potential for the formation of a national solar energy collection and distribution system involving the infrastructure of rural schools, given their size, diversity and locations. As Blakers (2005) also argues, a renewable energy source like solar usually "comprises thousands of small collectors rather than a small number of large, and potentially vulnerable, generation units" (p.111). Some rural (and other) schools are already embracing solar technology, and the scope for a greater role nationally in terms of direct contributions to the nation's energy requirements is 'ripe for the picking'. This includes rural schools taking a leading role in developing curriculum and certification to ensure there is expertise available where and when it is needed to help grow and drive the green revolution.

Thirdly, the issue of assuring fresh water supplies which have their headwaters in rural locations and traverse substantial rural landscapes entails ongoing investment, human intervention and management. The prolonged drought experienced in many areas of Australia, which has had a devastating impact on many students attending rural schools (Alston & Kent, 2006; Kenny, 2008) accentuates the merit of identifying opportunities to link education and water sustainability. Cullen (2005) argues that "[w]ater is the key to living and to economic development in Australia" and that a "sustainable future [for Australia] will entail extensive collaboration between governments and stakeholders [like education] to ensure that the true costs of water use are borne equitably and accountably in both rural and urban areas" (p. 79).

Fourthly, there is the profoundly important matter of arresting the decline of the natural environment, which includes climate change, and developing new paradigms of valuing it so that it, in turn, can do what it has always done – sustain life in all its complexity and diversity. "...an intimate connection to nature is both a basic right and a basic necessity...we have shaped nature, and it has shaped us, and we are an emergent property of this relationship. We cannot simply act as if we are separate. If we do so, we simply recreate the wasteland inside of ourselves" (Pretty, 2002, pp. 10-11). Or in the words of Callenbach quoted by Barlow (2007, p. 1), "*All things are interconnected. Everything goes somewhere. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Nature bats last.*"

Fifthly, there is the issue of maintaining territorial security. It is worth reflecting upon how the land mass of our nation will remain secured, moving into a future with rising pressure on space for human habitation and all the requirements for progressing and sustaining life. At various times in Australia's history since white settlement there has been a focus on 'populate or perish'. Recently, a report was released by the Northern Territory think tank, Desert Knowledge Australia (*The Australian*, September 2008), raising the possibility of Australia's sparsely populated interior—less than 15% of Australians live in settings statistically defined as rural—being seen as attractive 'vacant' land for others in need. Maintaining a purposeful presence is a 'soft' but significant contribution towards national security. What role(s) for rural communities and rural education here?

Continuing the overarching focus on being proactive about Australia's sustainability and expanding the policy focus of rural education, the next section proposes that city-based students access and experience country schools and communities as an integral component of their school education with a view to achieving two outcomes: firstly, improving the viability of rural education by increasing enrolments from sources outside of usual catchment areas; secondly, over time, increasing the pool of youth positively disposed to a career/employment in rural areas through first-hand experience of them.

CITY-TO-COUNTRY

City-based schools in the main are where the largest enrolments are; rural schools and communities are in the main experiencing population drift and decline and under-utilization of resources. Bringing the two sets of factors and contexts together seems to be a basis for addressing some fundamental viability and survival issues confronting rural schools, and making a significant contribution towards national sustainability.

Historically, rural schools have played a crucial role in building individual and community capacities (Kyle, 1990; Higgins, 1994; Lyson, 2002; McSwan, 2003; Halsey, 2007). While, as stated already, for many years there has been a relentless focus on maintaining the economic viability of rural schools through consolidations and closures, it also needs to be recognised that there are numerous features of rural schools and rural education 'ripe' for progressing *city-to-country*.

Firstly, there are instances of outstanding educational performance in rural contexts. This is especially so where rural schools and communities have worked together closely to expand options and drive up standards as strategies to retain existing enrolments and attract new ones into a district. The many instances of sustained high performance provide the basis for challenging a widely held view that the only way to get a good education is to leave town (see Corbett, 2007 for an extensive discussion of this matter).

Secondly, many rural schools have developed specialized vocational curriculum pathways like aquaculture, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, and environmental management, as well as the traditional academic ones, which are highly valued by students, community and employers. They are making a very significant contribution towards the knowledge and skills required for Australia's sustainability and international competitiveness.

Thirdly, it is often the case that new specializations as outlined have capacity to take extra enrolments at very little extra cost. In some instances, additional enrolments increase class viability not only in terms of efficient resource use, but also in terms of improvements to the learning environment. For example, an enterprise-team-based approach to aquaculture can be assisted by having a significant number of students to debate and trial alternative ways of growing high-quality market-ready produce. The same can be said for courses that have an extensive field experience component like agriculture or construction industries—sufficient students to simulate work place conditions is a major factor in the delivery of the intended learning experiences and outcomes. For other areas of the curriculum like history, English, mathematics and the sciences, an increase from a few students to 10 or 12 can also benefit teaching and learning.

Fourthly, rural education has embraced ICT and Australia is a world leader in distance education. There is a rich and long experience to draw upon here to propel further advances in using ICT to enhance pedagogy and learning. Finally, in most rural and remote communities there is a very strong desire for community survival and with this a real openness to working in new ways with new partners.

At the heart of progressing a *city-to-country* education initiative is the belief that it makes economic, social, cultural and political ‘good sense’ to improve the utilization of *all* of the nation’s schooling infrastructure, urban *and* rural. Linked with this is the belief that it is also economic, social, cultural and political ‘good sense’ to have opportunities readily available for youth to access their school-level education in *rural* as well as urban contexts. What is required to bring a *city-to-country* initiative into being?

Firstly, resourcing is needed for city students to access country learning and living and for country schools and communities to appropriately host and care for them.

The national Country Areas Program, which ran in Australia for over 25 years and which focused on ‘adding what’s missing’ for country students, is very instructive when considering a new approach to education provisioning.

One of the main reasons for the Country Areas Program’s success is that it provided additional funding—around \$120 million over 4 years (DEST, 2006)—to rural schools to augment and enrich learning. Frequently the extra money was used by schools and communities to access learning experiences that were outside of their locality, either by travelling, bringing in specialist expertise or purchasing additional teaching resources. The Country Areas Program was an acknowledgement of the fact that external impetus and additional resourcing for schools and communities are often the difference between the success and the failure of a venture.

In addition to resourcing, opportunities need to be arranged with states, territories and key stakeholders for envisioning the potential benefits of a *city-to-country* initiative for national sustainability. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) found from their research, the compelling thing to do when undertaking a major change, like reversing the predominant flow of students from country schools to city schools in search of a ‘better education’, is to “*show* people what the problems [and opportunities] are and how to resolve them” (p. 8). Kotter and Cohen (2002) also found that “[p]eople change what they do less because they are given *analysis* that

shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* [and have opportunities to explore] a truth that influences their *feelings*" (p. 1).

One of the 'truths' that needs to be embraced is that education and training acquired in a country location has equivalent merit to education and training gained in a city context. Differences and uniqueness need to be acknowledged and valued – it will be counterproductive to achieving the development being advocated if either of the partners ('city' or 'country') is considered to be the junior member. One way to avoid this occurring is to recognize that partnership approaches to change "are in most cases complex but [also] dynamic in the sense that they evolve and change as they move through successive phases of diagnosis, planning and implementation...[and] there is a balance to be struck between the motivating activities of mutual encouragement, recognition and celebration and the essential disciplines of challenge, critique and evaluation" (Woolhouse, 1999, pp. 96–97). As well, "the chief characteristic of partnership is common effort towards common goals" (Seeley, 1981, p. 65).

Secondly, individual students currently attract resources into schools and then decisions are made by systems and at a local level about the best way to gain maximum outcomes from the inputs. These existing resources for education open the possibility of different decisions being made about how to use them, consistent with the proposed approach.

Thirdly, given the central role and place of schools in most rural and remote areas, a *city-to-country* initiative provides a vehicle for engaging other service providers like health and transport, as well as the private sector, in developing better integration of policy and programs that could add momentum to the approach to educational provisioning being advocated.

In addition to the matters outlined above, there are others that will require discussion and decisions, like which age range(s) should participate, how will timetables and releases be determined and coordinated, and how will the care and custodial aspects of exchanges be managed. Matters such as these can be resolved because there is a wealth of relevant expertise and experience available to facilitate the formation and implementation of new rural-urban schooling partnerships nationally.

ADVANCING THE NEW POLICY FRONT

Leadership is the key to advancing a new policy front for rural education catalysed around sustainability. While leadership is not the exclusive domain of those in formal positions of authority like school principals, my remarks in this section are essentially addressed to school leaders. I have chosen to do this because I believe that a substantial opening up of a new policy front for rural education will largely rise or fall on their preparedness to grasp and run with the opportunity. It is recognised that for Australian school leaders, this will likely involve them confronting what their United States counterparts have to deal with as well when challenged to do more for their communities – "juggling the demands of competing constituencies while responding to a welter of state and federal mandates" (Woodrum, 2005, p. 2).

A deep understanding of local context is central to leadership that engages communities to consider what else might be. So too is understanding contexts that are wider in nature. MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004) in their research on “making schools work” (p. xv) argue that there are “at least four dimensions of the environment in which a school functions – internal, local, national and global [and refer to these as] contextual intelligence” (p. 122). Contextual intelligence is ‘a must’ for educational leaders. Senge’s (1992) distinguishing characteristics of outstanding leaders – “clarity and persuasiveness of their ideas, the depth of their commitment, and their openness to continually learn more” (p. 359) – are also ‘a must’ for rural educational leaders who want to open and advance new policy fronts.

Having identified some fundamental leadership capacities and qualities, the matter of *how*, the manner in which things are done to open a new policy front for rural education using sustainability as the centrepiece, also needs to be addressed. Earlier I referred to Soja’s work and advocacy of *Other* as a means for questioning the status quo and progressing new ideas. At least some of the *how* dimensions of the work I believe needs to be done to reinvigorate rural education so that it matters in shaping national policy may lie in further engagement with Soja’s thinking.

Pursuing *Other*, like a new policy front, requires rural educational leaders to spend time creating and seeking out opportunities that have the potential to disturb and shift the status quo. They need to do this in many different ways including by questioning, by influencing meeting agendas, by developing links and alliances within and beyond the school, by moving around and through the school and community picking up clues and making suggestions as to ‘what might be done instead’. They need to read widely to nurture their imagining of *Other*.

Leaders need to posit, advocate and prosecute *Other* while simultaneously working to retain and manage sufficient definition, sufficient order, sufficient sense of continuity to maintain organisational coherence and effective functioning. They need to engage in a continuous process of knowledge making about ‘what might be; what could be; what needs to be’ essentially arising out of their contexts and what Soja calls spatiality, the “socially produced space” dimensions of their roles (1996, p. 80).

As argued by Soja, space as a word is most frequently associated with a “physicalist view of it” (1996, p. 80) which limits the richness of it as a concept for exploring new understandings about complex matters like opening a new policy front for rural education using nation sustainability as the ‘big idea’. Put another way, the term spatial needs to be ‘naturally’ considered intrinsic to “social context and to social action” and “link[ed] to human action and motivation”, something which is “formative” in character rather than “geometrical...and external” or a taken-for-granted given about context (1996, p. 80).

Schools and education are always situated in a stasis–change dynamic. Spatiality, socially constructed space, is a resource for leaders for working with and through and around the ‘products’ of such a dynamic, which principals activate and use to create and re-create their roles. “Spatiality foregrounds the potential productiveness of the social qualities of organised space. It draws attention to the meanings and substantiveness ascribed to the social qualities, nuances and dynamics of spaces [which] may be defined or prescribed in many different ways such as

historically, relationally, communally, conceptually or imaginatively” (Halsey, 2007, p. 105).

In relation to the *how* of rural principals playing an enabling and paradigm shifting role, finding and constructing and using space to facilitate the possibility of new ideas emerging may provide a novel yet productive way to advance new thinking about policy development arising out of ‘unlikely contexts’. The qualities of the social spaces leaders create or find will have a bearing on what might emerge in terms of leading and managing the tensions between status quo and change.

In a book of contributions on the future of leadership by various authors, written to celebrate the life and work of Warren Bennis, Bennis has the privilege of authoring the final chapter. While acknowledging how history had influenced his career, he particularly emphasised the power of “the spirit of *place*” (Bennis, Spreitzer and Cummings, 2001, p. 280). This is also fundamental to the challenge that needs to be taken up by rural educational leaders in pursuit of opening a new policy front—to discern and harness the “spirit of *place*” to help progress change. Put another way, leaders need to recognise that where they are *is* a critical place to be for starting something new.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One of the major challenges facing Australia is sustainability, which is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that includes economic, political, environmental, energy, water and security considerations, all of which impact on national well-being. Looking towards 2050 when the population of the planet will have increased by nearly 50% throws into sharp relief a clutch of critical challenges. Rural education and its policy agenda has for many decades primarily focussed upon responding to decline to ‘keep things going; keep things open’. While this has been understandable and much has been achieved, it is now opportune—essential?—that rural education and its leaders embrace a new challenge, sustainability, and use it to pursue new policy fronts. Failure to do so runs the very real risk of further marginalisation from national policy debates and developments that matter.

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