

# REVIEWING THE *RURAL LENS* IN EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

*It is interesting to reflect upon past conversations and to explore their implications for current practice. That is the point of the current paper, which looks back at our progress towards adopting a rural lens to drive policy - to develop initiatives for rural education based upon rural needs, rather than apparent metro-centric political decision making and policy development.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent keynote address Wallace and Boylan (2007) argued for a re-evaluation of the ways in which we, as educators, engage with conversations around rural education. Central to that discussion was a simple metaphor, that of a *rural lens* (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). The *rural lens* is a way of reconceptualising or rethinking our current practices. It is a way that allows us to ask hard educational questions that refocus the attention of decision makers specifically on rural education policy and practice. It came from a concern that so much of our policy making and practice is reactive, coming from a city-based often deficit view of the rural landscape. In such a regime rural educators and communities do themselves a great dis-service, and end up with strategies that do not reflect the unique conditions of rural areas.

In short, the keynote paper called for a re-examination of our thinking from a rural perspective, rather than from the typical metro-centric or bureaucratic perspective. It did this by documenting the nature of change within rural communities, and the changing nature of rural economics and sociologies within emerging national and global environmental and socio-economic parameters (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). It developed around many of the deficit models that seem to pervade current rural education policy making, with roots extending way back to the thinking of Turney, Sinclair & Cairns (1980) in the late 1970's.

## THE NATURE OF THE *RURAL LENS*

In essence the notion of a *rural lens* involves a reversal of thinking – to begin in rural places, looking outwards for policy rather than being reactionary to policy developed in other places and times. It is notion of particular moment in our current political and educational context, and has drawn international attention. As indicated in Wallace and Boylan (2007), it finds expression in a Canadian Federal government initiative that focuses on a recognition of the principles of equity, difference and the uniqueness of rural locations as government policies and programs are developed and implemented. In Canada, the *rural lens* is a strategy that

seeks to sustain the social, cultural, economic attributes of rural communities as well as strengthening their community capacity building options through the provision of contextually relevant services, of which education and the staffing of rural and remote schools is one cornerstone.



The *rural lens* poses critical questions for policy and program developers and decision makers about quality of life, accessibility to and delivery of service provision and the measurement of the impacts of government policies on rural communities and their people (Rural Secretariat, 2007). For education systems charged with the responsibility for the staffing of rural and remote schools, these questions are essential for the provision of a high quality education.

Wallace and Boylan (2007) suggested that rural educators, armed with a *rural lens*, need to be challenge by two fundamental issues. The first of these is the Challenge-Deficit theory of rural education (Ankrah-Dove, 1982), and the second relates to our growing understanding of the concept of *Place* (Bryden, 2003; Gray, 1991).

The Challenge-Deficit theory *is* widely used to drive rural education policy, with particular reference to the work of Linda Ankrah-Dove (1982). It draws upon theoretical foundations in psychology linked with personal and job satisfaction and sociological concepts associated with personal and professional adjustment and person-environment fit. The theory uses these concepts, and then applies them to staffing rural and remote schools, arguing that teachers (either pre-service or in-service) predominantly hold either a *challenge* or a *deficit* viewpoint about rural appointments, rural schools and their communities. The model effectively adopts a *rural lens* to question teacher belief systems about rural places as well as the issues which drive departmental staffing practices and policies.

A number of strategies warrant attention. Pre-service programs that include studies about rural society, rural schools and their communities and the conditions of living and teaching in rural and remote places were shown to be important in this context, including the *Beyond the Line* initiative between New South Wales

Department of Education and Training, rural districts and universities across the state; the Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (Lock, 2007); and approaches akin to the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that teachers develop and implement for their own students.



The second fundamental issue is *Place*. *Place* impacts upon teacher recruitment and retention, and is a new and significant challenge for educational authorities. *Place* recognises that uniqueness, value and relevance that the history, cultural value system, language, social infrastructure, the impact of the environment and the economic realities have on shaping the local community in ways that define it as different to other places. Rural places by their very geographical separation and access-related isolation from larger urban centres develop in ways that often seen by outsiders as *traditional, conservative, and narrow in their views*, yet to the rural dweller they are entirely appropriate and functional.

*Place* based education is about education that connects with the local traditions and concerns. It seeks active local community input into the teaching programs and content, emphasises the value and importance of the local, and ensures the learning of children is contextually relevant to *their place*. This hallmark feature of *place* based education is central to the various federal and state education authorities focus on quality teaching and learning frameworks, but an approach challenges conventional wisdom around centralised or national curriculum as well as programs.

## **APPLYING THE *RURAL LENS***

Using the concept of the *rural lens* to examine policy, programs and practices currently in operation at federal, state and local levels, a number of challenges still remain. Among these challenges for rural educators are three broad sets of issues:

### **A national rural education policy**

At the same time as Wallace and Boylan (2007) delivered their address at the 23<sup>rd</sup> National SPERA Conference, Pegg (2007) was proposing the creation of a National Rural School Education strategy. This policy and program initiative grew out of the SiMERR research. The Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR) research program examined the preparation, training and provision of specialist school science, ICT and mathematics teachers. It explored the ways in which the social, educational and cultural determinants affect these teachers as they live and work in rural and remote places across Australia. The SiMERR project clearly adopted the concept of a *rural lens* and argued for the government recognition of rural education as a priority matter in much the same way that rural health has been accorded this significant policy, program and practice level of support.

Since 2007, Pegg (2009) has emphasised the need to work at three levels: i) to develop an integrated policy and program approach to rural education issues; ii) to create an inclusive approach to rural Australia that sees a coordinated cross government department and joint state and Federal government partnerships; and finally to iii) plan for a coordinated research agenda for rural education.

Halsey (2005) and the work of the *Rural Education Forum of Australia* (REFA) has also emphasised this need for a coordinated research agenda. Yet since then, government decision makers have not responded to the call. Pegg (2009) states 'Despite numerous efforts by state and Federal authorities, data from many reports in Australia over a long period show very little change.' (p.43). For policy developers, the concept of the *rural lens* seems to be like some hard-to-staff rural schools, it is a hard-to-appreciate focal idea for rural education.

It is thus contended that we need to drive policy further, through the development of strong rural advocacy based around national as well as state agendas. That means effective lobbying to ensure that the views of the rural education community are heard around issues as diverse as staffing and curriculum. Part of the challenge for rural educators is to ensure that research into rural and remote education firstly reflects accurately the voices of rural Australia – the *National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* (HREOC, 2000) achieved this goal through its extensive consultation processes in each state and territory of Australia and secondly, to ensure that both Federal and state levels of government respond to and implement the key recommendations arising from these research programs. With both the *National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* and the *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* (MCEETYA, 2001) the purpose and intent of both policy documents was significant, but neither Federal nor state governments chose to adopt or implement the key recommendations from these reports.

## **Emergent issues for rural education**

In much of rural Australia, climate change and drought continue to be a major and on-going fact of life. The impact on agricultural production, family ownership of farms, viability of small rural communities and rural school participation and retention figures present policy makers with a clear opportunity to use the *rural lens* to construct policies and programs that provide strategies to sustain rural enterprises, communities and schools (Alston & Kent, 2004). Again, it seems that the commitment and will of governments to move forward in positive, creative, responsive and innovative ways is lacking.

Further, the world-wide and Australian economic downturn from 2008 and 2009 has impacted dramatically upon rural Australia. In rural communities employment opportunities are limited and with a recession occurring redundancies, retrenchments, laying off staff and moving staff from full-time to part-time work all have a major impact on rural schools and their communities. The need for employment will see families relocate from the small places in rural Australia to regional or capital cities. This relocation exacerbates rural population decline, school staffing reductions, a loss of social capital within the community and the loss of rural youth from small communities. The alternative to relocation is to stay in a community facing higher rates of unemployment, and the associated negative impacts of a contracting local economy.

As a final emergent issue, there have been a number of recent federal and state reports on the projected staffing needs for all education sectors in Australia (eg. AEU, 2001; Gerard Daniels, 2007; Lonsdale & Ingvarson, 2003; and Roberts, 2005). Collectively these reports identify the challenge of staffing rural and remote schools over the next decade. Yet, there are very few examples of policy development or program implementation using a *rural lens* to address this staffing issue that can be identified within the various education employer authorities. The staffing of rural schools is based upon metro-centric concerns, and a desire to solve political and logistical issues of rural staffing rather than reflecting an agenda to enhance rural education.

It seems that to ignore the emergent issues facing rural Australia is to be left by the wake of dominant metro-centric opinion and strategies. The issues face wide areas of rural Australia, and warrant attention at the Federal as well as at the local levels. The *rural lens* supports such approaches, as it brings the attention of decision makers to the evolving nature of rural living. We need to think differently if we are to promote effective rural education.

## **Student engagement and achievement**

A number of recent research including projects such as the *An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project* (Pegg, Lynch & Pannizzon, 2007), the *Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP)* (Green et al, 2003) and the *Science, ICT, Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR) Project*, (Pegg 2009) point to consistent trends in student performance. The data suggest that rural students do not achieve academically to the same level as their city based counterparts. This pattern in student engagement and achievement is a major educational challenge.

Coupled with the often smaller enrolment numbers found in rural schools, especially in the secondary education area, the curriculum choice for students is often restricted despite recent technological attempts to provide greater choice. For many rural students, the importance and value of succeeding and achieving well at the Year 12 level is not one of their priorities. A partial explanation for this phenomenon has been identified through research in rural Newfoundland, where Mulcahy (2009) stated that 'School program and graduation requirements are planned and developed for larger urban schools. ... The problem is that none of these assumptions hold true for smaller rural schools' (p. 27).

At another level, one key aspect of this difference in student achievement is that lack of recognition and inclusion of relevant place based educational experiences in many of the curriculum. This problem is most manifest at the secondary and senior secondary education levels where prescriptive syllabuses and state-wide end of Year 12 testing regimes are enacted. Bryden (2003) has clearly argued for the need to developed place inclusive teaching programs that celebrate the local historical, cultural, social, economic diversity and employment opportunities in each rural place. Here again, the adoption of the *rural lens* is clearly lacking, and must be promoted to support appropriate curriculum to support rural communities. The Enterprise Education project (Sinclair 2004) documents examples from rural New South Wales of such initiatives, illustrating the need to provide flexibility for rural communities, allowing them to adapt curriculum to meet local cultural and community needs as a critical imperative of the work of their school.

## CONCLUSION

It is interesting to reflect upon the conclusion of Wallace and Boylan (2007). They suggested that the notion of adopting a *rural lens* is in many ways an old idea, in that over a long period of time SPERA has worked to improve the status and condition of rural education. Using a *rural lens* suggests that we, as rural educators, should drive decision making from within. This will lead to the abandoning of traditional staffing mechanisms to find one that gives voice back to rural communities. It is one which starts with the real needs of remote/rural communities to support students and learning in more appropriate ways.

The challenge remains - and it is timely to be reminded of the implications as we see the world, and become pragmatic in our drive to enhance rural education through the focus of a *rural lens*!

## ARTICULATING THE RURAL EXPERIENCES OF RIVERTON STUDENTS

Although the analysis of literacy practices requires further development, it is important in this process to develop a profile and understanding of the particularities of the communication environment these adolescents experience. Students at Riverton High (a pseudonym) lived both in the township and some distance from it. During an average day they would keep in touch with friends and family, both in terms of micro- and hyper-coordination. This section will focus on communications challenges that were shared amongst youth in Riverton, as articulated through the voices of individual project participants, with regard to three main structuring factors: network choice, phone coverage and financial cost. These

issues were key features in the landscape of Riverton students' mobile communication practices.



PS. This farm and letterbox was for sale in 2007 - it is STILL for sale :)

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## Keywords

rural education, rural lens, rural policy development



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