

FARM FAIR VOICES, SPACE, HISTORY, THE MIDDLE GROUND AND 'THE FUTURE' OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

This article is essentially written as two linked parts. The first part considers how space, spatiality and history can contribute to understanding and 'doing something about' the sustainability of rural communities. This is done by extensive reference to Soja's (1989 & 1996) space and spatial theorising and selective perspectives of history from Williams (1973) and Davison (2005). Essentially I think of space, spatiality and history as a set of conceptual tools for achieving some new traction on the enduring issue of the sustainability of rural communities, and this is the spirit in which the first part of the article is offered. The second part of the article is an overview of the Mapping of Rural Communities project in South Australia and the findings from one data collection site, the Karoonda Farm Fair in the Mallee Region of the state, together with some analysis of findings using space, spatiality, history and White's (1999) middle ground concept to generate suggestions about what education may offer in terms of 'The Future' of rural communities.

I have used 'The Future' of rural communities instead of 'sustainability' at various times to accentuate the problematic nature of sustainability being a likely outcome, 'going forward'. As well, 'rural' is used as a collective term for locations that are other than capital cities and the remaining population centres in Australia of 100,000 or more. I am aware this is somewhat of a broad-brush approach to defining rural but it is adequate for the purposes of this article; for detailed discussions about defining rural contexts and their characteristics see Walton (1993), Griffith (1996), Mulley (1999), Hugo (2005) and Halsey (2009).

RURAL AND SUSTAINABILITY

That rural communities are critically important to the future of Australia should by now be beyond question. I have argued elsewhere there are five major issues confronting Australia which underscore why it is essential to maintain a very strong focus on the sustainability of rural communities (Halsey, 2009). Briefly, food security is critical and as Pretty (2002) argues this is really not a choice item—“[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). Second is the issue of energy—much of what Australia consumes daily is sourced from rural areas—and the pressure to move from fossil based sources of energy to green renewable sources continues to grow. Third is the issue of water and water management. 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). Fourth 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). Finally there is the issue of managing Australia’s territorial security in a context of escalating population growth and likely impacts of climate change. My intention in making this point is not to hark back to the days of ‘populate or perish’. Rather it is to draw attention to the fact that the combined consequences of world population growth and population displacement due to climate change (and other events) may result in millions of people having to find somewhere new to live or, in a comparatively short timeframe, become water based citizens of the 21st century because their land has been claimed by the sea.

In addition to the issues as briefly outlined above, there are other facts and consequences of human interactions with nature that accentuate the importance of the sustainability of rural communities being a major national priority. During the working life of the Baby-boomer generation, the world’s population has nearly doubled. This growth has been matched, and in some ways driven, by wave after wave of new discoveries and the rapid adoption of technology of myriad kinds. Paralleling this growth has been an increasing use of natural resources, many of which are non-renewable like fossil fuel and minerals. Just one piece of data provides a lens into understanding the enormity of human impact on non-renewable resources: “concrete consumption in cities each year is equivalent to 730 Great Pyramids of Giza ... [or] eight times more than the total global automobile fleet” (Brugmann, 2009, p. 12). The growth in consumption of non-renewables has come at

an enormous cost to the natural environment, and has driven some of the systems we rely on for sustainability perilously close to the point of being unable to recover. Further, 'being unable to recover' presumes we have accurate ways of measuring pre-intervention inventories of nature's 'treasures'. While there may be some contention with this in academic and research circles, many people who live close with nature and the natural environment—who have essentially enjoined with nature in a dance of sustainable production and harvesting—can speak from deep and long experience that 'things are not as they once were' when it comes to nature's capacity for self-renewing and self-regulating its 'taken for granted' abundance.

Another way to visualise the point I am trying to make here: think of the decline that has occurred to major fisheries and fish stocks around much of the world and, while doing so, also ask yourself is there not something deeply ironic about farming fish when nature can 'supply' fish so more effectively if given 'half a chance'. Kurlansky's profoundly insightful and disturbing book on the biography of the cod and its demise overtime—"abundance turned to scarcity through determined short sightedness" (1997, rear dust jacket)—ought to be compulsory reading for anyone who wants to understand how human intervention can bring renewable resources to the brink of extinction. As Diamond argues, "[m]anaging environmental [natural and renewable] resources sustainably has *always* been difficult...because of ubiquitous problems ... the resources initially seem inexhaustibly abundant; that signs of their incipient depletion become masked by normal fluctuations in resource levels between years or decades; that it's difficult to get people to agree on exercising restraint in harvesting a shared resource (the so-called tragedy of the commons...); and the complexity of ecosystems often makes the consequences of some human-caused perturbation virtually impossible to predict even for a professional ecologist" (2005, pp. 9 & 10).

As well, consider what is continuing to happen in many rural areas and communities both in Australia and many other parts of the world, as globalisation and its relentless 'addiction' to economy of scale ideology and 'natural' ways of operating, continues to transform rural landscapes, sucking out people and replacing them with technology and mass market franchised services and bigger tractors, wider seeders, more efficient extraction machinery, faster turnaround times and the demise of local stores, producers and purveyors of daily staples and services. As Brugmann (2009) asserts, "[s]cale permits the splitting of fixed costs and known risks over a large enough group of users to make an activity attractive or service profitable *in a big way* ... [and together with] density that increases the sheer *efficiency* by which we can pursue an economic opportunity ... [which in turn] increases the range of opportunities and level of ambition that can be viably pursued ..." (p. 27). Though not the a main focus of this article, it is important to recognise that one of the really complex challenges of rural sustainability is developing economic models that are less reliant on economies of scale to deliver efficiencies and viability.

Renewable resources and the spaces and places which nurture and regenerate them have generally been treated as though they are infinite when even a brief

examination of a photograph of Earth taken from outer-space reveals a planet that is finite, though imbued with systems and natural laws that have an apparent inexhaustible capacity for regeneration—for sustainability. Add to this a world population by 2050 of between 9 and 10 billion and Australia’s population growth from 22-plus million to around 35 million in the same time, and a complex mix of issues, challenges and factors clustering around sustaining rural communities becomes ever more urgent.

Given the magnitude, diversity and complexity of the changes and issues happening globally and locally that impact directly or indirectly on ‘*The Future*’ of rural communities, the assertion of space and spatial perspectives, history and the middle ground on ‘what is going on; what might go on’ may produce new traction on the sustainability of rural communities. First, space and spatiality.

SPACE AND SPATIALITY

Soja (1989) argues that “it may be space more than time [history] that hides consequences from us” (p. 1). To assess the potential of space and spatiality and diverse ways of thinking about them as means to critique consequences of decisions, policies and opportunities about rural spaces, for example, and to assist in analysing and interpreting research about rural communities, first requires some understanding of what seems to lie at the heart of Soja’s thinking about space and spatiality. There appear to be at least four important messages relevant to the purpose of this article.

First, it is most likely the case that when hearing or using the term ‘space’, most people are attuned to the physical properties of it. One of the defining characteristics of rural space in Australia, in particular, is the way the word space is inextricably linked to physical geography and physical properties like distance, area, land forms and vistas. While this is ‘to be expected’, there is more to space than the physical and structural location of it. Put differently, the physical is but one side of the space coin. The other side of the space coin is the socially constructed aspects of space. As Soja argues, it is critically important to furthering understanding of space, to seeing it in its fullness and richness, to be “as clear as possible [about] the distinction between space *per se*, space as a contextual given, and socially-produced spatiality, the created space of social organization and production” (p. 79). The former has a sense of givenness about it in terms of rural contexts, features and characteristics like a river, a mountain range, vast distances, plains and dense woodlands.

Associated with the physical dimension of space, there is also the matter of how it is perceived. Einstein (1924) famously suggested that space was itself defined by the characteristics and perceptions of an observer. One example of such a phenomenon is the rotation of the Earth. Despite the fact that the earth is in constant rotation, human perception of this space is largely static, while the sky is perceived as being in motion. In this manner, human perception of space differs drastically from actual

space, impacting upon the way humans interact with their environment (Mittelstaedt, Glaussauer, Gralla & Mittelstaedt, 1989). Consider for a moment what may happen if you were to feel (not know) that you were constantly moving at a speed of approximately 1670km an hour (a somewhat conservative estimate). This may appear as somewhat of a tangent, but the point I am trying to make is that in the rural context, the perceptions of the space in which one resides may have a defining effect on the ways in which one interacts with both rural and urban areas. Perhaps, distances in the rural context are exaggerated in the mind, or even perceived as insurmountable. Possibly the physical distance that separates rural from urban in the Australian context may lead to rural areas being perceived as more different or even less important by 'city folk' (and visa-versa).

Spatiality by way of contrast to the physical and perceptual properties of space reveals the human constructedness of space and spaces, the prerogatives which have been or may be exercised about what is, what might be, what might become of, and so forth. Examples of spatiality in terms of rural contexts are numerous and diverse and include decisions about boundaries between town centre and hinterland, the formation of paddocks and roadways, the places people meet informally and formally, the allocation of space for services and support typically for women and children like birthing support and facilities and child development, and the allocation of space typically associated with the world of men like the location and size of stock sale yards. Schools in rural areas are a particularly rich instance of "created space of social organization and production" (Soja, 1989, p. 79) which I elaborate on later when exploring possibilities about what schools might do and become in light of changes occurring in rural contexts, and some findings from the Karoonda Farm Fair in South Australia as mentioned earlier.

Secondly, Soja (1989) asserts that confining our thinking about space to physical 'given' properties only, and then using this to engage with complex issues like the sustainability of rural communities, is limiting and constraining. The physical givenness literally gets in the way of expanding our conceptual horizons or, put another way, "physical space has been a misleading epistemological foundation upon which to analyse the concrete and subjective meaning of human spatiality" (p. 79). Further, "[o]nce it becomes accepted that the organization of space is a social product—that it arises from purposeful social practice—then there is no longer a question of its being a separate structure with rules of construction that are independent from the wider social framework" (p. 80). In making these points it is important to recognise that my engagement, my approaches, my research—yes, my passion—about rural contexts and communities, may also be constraints on my capacity to understand, appreciate and use space fully.

Thirdly, socially constructed space, spatiality, not only opens a realm of thinking that helps one to see and understand the physical constructedness of communities as also the product of certain decisions about social and economic relationships, it also helps to foreground political dimensions of space as well. By this I mean the design, configuration and allocation of physical space has embedded in it varying degrees of

contestation and consensus. Reflecting on Castells' (1977) conceptualization of space as "*a material product*, in relation with other elements – among others men [sic], who themselves enter into particular social relations which give to space ... a form, a function, a social signification", Soja (1989) concludes that Castells "presented space as a material product emerging dialectically from the interaction of culture and nature" (pp. 83 & 84).

Fourthly, a few brief comments on the unevenness of space and spatiality *vis a vis* urban and rural and how this might also shape discourse and debate about rural spaces and '*The Future*'. With reference to Marxist analysis in the 1970's, Soja (1989) declares that in an increasingly urbanised world, the city has come to be seen "not only in its distinctive role as a centre for the industrial production and accumulation, but also as the control point for the reproduction of capitalist society in terms of labour power, exchange and consumption patterns" (p. 95). To add to the force of this point, Brugmann has stated that "by 2040, nearly two thirds of the world's people will live in cities" (2009, p. 15). In an urbanising world, Soja concludes from his analysis of Mandel's research that "unequal development of regions [rural] and nations is as fundamental to capitalism [globalisation] as the direct exploitation of labour by capital ... [and from this poses the question] is geographically uneven development a necessary as well as a contingent feature of capitalism?" (Soja, 1989, p. 104). Further, Soja argues that a "dialectic tension between differentiation and equalization is the underlying dynamic of geographically uneven development" (p. 107). In relation to rural contexts and the unevenness of space and spatiality, there is no alluding, either in the quotes or the remainder of the chapter from which they are taken, to the dependence of urban spaces on rural spaces and in particular what they produce and what they *are*. Neither is there a sense that spatial relations in urban contexts might vary from those in rural contexts, or that in theorising about rural spaces and the '*The Future*' it might be productive to do this in an interdependent way with urban spaces. As well, and perhaps more importantly to reasserting the place of rural spaces in shaping public discourse and debate about '*The Future*', the unevenness of rural spaces is categorised as necessary – a pre-requisite – to urban development.

Turning to how history may also contribute to a refocussing of rural communities and '*The Future*', selections from two rural historical works by Williams (1973) and Davison (2005) are discussed in the next section of the article. Each of the authors approaches history from a set of different vantage points, namely countries, Britain and Australia; eras, the 1970s and the early twenty first century; and perspectives, one using literature spanning several centuries, the other a taxonomy of phases of white settlement patterns.

HISTORY AND HISTORICITY

Williams (1973) lucidly explicates the "changing historical realities" between the country and the city "both in themselves and in their interrelations" (p. 289), which essentially complements Soja's idea of geographic unevenness. While the city and

country are only two kinds of many forms of settlement, “the idea of country and city retain their great force... [or] persistence” (Williams, 1973, p. 289). Very significant in terms of what is required to sustain a rural community is William’s argument about the interplay between permanence and persistence. In particular there is the importance of things required for a community to persist which are also subjected to continuous change, which in turn frequently and negatively impacts on the capacity of a community to endure. An illustration in relation to education is the relationship between a school’s enrolments and its curriculum—essentially, the greater the number and age range of the students, the greater the resources allocated and therefore the more diverse the curriculum that can be offered. A decline in enrolments occurs—another bank closes, the local mini-market stops trading, a school in a regional centre extends its bus routes and offers incentives to families to enrol their children—and the local school loses enrolments which in turn reduces the curriculum available locally. But, in order to persist, to resist the downward domino effect, the local school needs to be able to maintain, even expand, its curriculum, not reduce it. So when the need to retain education services is at its most acute—‘if they reduce the subjects available any further I will be sending my child elsewhere’—so too is the pressure to contract.

Williams captures the essence of what is occurring in many rural areas and communities in the following extract from *The Country and the City*:

Clearly the contrast of country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society. But when this is so, the temptation is to reduce the historical variety of the forms of interpretation to what are loosely called symbols or archetypes: to abstract even these most evidently social forms and to give them a primarily psychological or metaphysical status. This reduction often happens when we find certain major forms and images and ideas persisting through periods of great change [such as presently occurring]. Yet if we can see that the persistence depends on the form and images and ideas being changed, though often subtly, internally and at times unconsciously, we can also see that the persistence indicates some permanent or effectively permanent need, to which the changing circumstances speak. I believe that there is indeed such a need, and that it is created by the processes of a particular history. But if we do not see these processes, or see them only incidentally, we fall back on modes of thought which seem able to create the permanence without the history...to put it more theoretically, we have to be able to explain, in related terms, both the persistence and the historicity of the concepts. (1973, p. 3)

Williams (1973) reveals the evolving character of country (rural) over centuries by drawing on his extensive reading and knowledge of mainly British literature to illuminate and critique the changing nature of the relations between country and city. He acknowledges how his background and the enduring images of country and country life have played a seminal role in shaping who he is and how he ‘sees the world’—“I was born in a village and still live in a village ... [and recognise that] country life has many meanings” (p. 3). The relevance (as well as elegance) of his

writing relating to both points using a clutch of images, memories and traditions, is valuable in demonstrating how history – the flow of time and the associations with it – contribute further meanings about rural and ‘The Future’:

It is elms, the may, the white horse, in the field beyond the window where I am writing. It is the men in November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in their pockets of their khaki coats; and the women in headscarves, outside their cottages, waiting for the blue bus that will take them, inside school hours, to work in the harvest. It is the tractor on the road, leaving tracks of serrated pressed mud; the light of the small hours, in the pig-farm across the road, in the crisis of litter; the slow brown van met at the difficult corner, with the crowded sheep jammed to its slatted sides; the heavy smell, on still evenings, of silage ricks fed with molasses. It is also sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road, that is selling for housing, for speculative development, at twelve thousand pounds an acre...the physical contrast [between where] I was born under the Black Mountains...[and here] under the high East Anglia skies...physical contrast is continually present to me...[there is also] deep contrast in which so much feeling is held: between what seems unmediated nature – a physical awareness of trees, birds, the moving shapes of land – and a working agriculture, in which much of nature is in fact being produced. (p. 3)

In contrast to Williams’ approach to the history of rural life and communities based upon literature and social critique, Davison’s (2005) historical contribution commences with a very different framing, one of a more pragmatic and political kind – “ ‘[s]ustainability is the newest addition to the lexicon of rural decline” (p. 38). The time span of his contribution is the period of white settlement in Australia and what Davison calls the “deep dilemma” (p. 38) that has sat at the heart of Australia’s European settlement narrative almost from the start. It is that “the coastal cities claimed a large and apparently abnormal proportion of the population of the colonies ... [y]et the countryside remained, in the eyes of many observers, the only true and enduring source of national prosperity and wellbeing” (p. 38), and I would add, national identity. Davison essentially argues that acknowledging the ‘full’ history of white settlement rather than being either selective, treating it superficially or ignoring it, would likely produce better traction with some of the deep issues associated with ‘The Future’ of rural communities. In his words, “[o]nly by excavating the past can we begin to appraise the depth and prospects for sustainability ... [because] ... sustainability is not only an economic, demographic and environmental concept; it is also a historical concept ... [i]t links future expectations and present policies with past experiences” (2005, p. 39). A further historical contribution to understanding and engaging with rural Australia is Davison’s (pp. 39 & 40) enunciation of five phases of the two centuries or so of European settlement:

In the opening decades of British settlement, colonial administrators planted new towns, confident that they would naturally evolve towards European maturity. In the later 19th century, the golden age of liberalism, colonial governments sought to water the soil in which rural communities could grow, by opening opportunities for closer settlement ('unlocking the lands') and supplying infrastructure of railways, irrigation and education that would enable individual and collective enterprise to flourish. By the early 20th century, however, young people were drifting from the countryside to the city, and inland towns had begun their long decline. Progressive reformers, mindful of the strong contribution of rural enterprise to national prosperity and fearful of the corrupting influences of city life on the 'future of the race', now sought to protect rural communities through a range of special government programs...In the heyday of Postwar Reconstruction [WW 2], there was strong, if short-lived, confidence that the state could plan and support rural communities through comprehensive programs of decentralisation...[the declining contribution of rural communities to national life meant that] rural communities now faced the challenge, not only to survive, but to sustain themselves economically and environmentally.

SPACE AND HISTORY

Soja (1989) opens his work on the role of space in social critical theory by asserting that history has dominated how contexts and events are read. Put another way, "a sequentially unfolding narrative predisposes the reader to think historically, making it difficult to see the text as a map, a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic" (p. 1). My point, however, is not that an historical reading of text has diminished or made invisible a spatial rendering of text, or vice versa, but that taken together, working together, space and history, spatiality and historicity, are more likely than not to unearth fresh ways of thinking about and doing something practical on the ground about rural communities, education and sustainability. Or as Soja (1996) later argues, "there is a growing awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical, and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence (p. 3).

Space – the natural and physical properties, and spatiality – socially produced space, foreground two critical perspectives of place in a locational and possibilities sense. Firstly there is what Cocklin and Dibden refer to as natural capital – "natural resources, ecosystem services and the aesthetics or beauty of nature" (p. 4). Space also refers to dimensions, scale, and evokes relativities. The physical properties of space highlight the 'givens' of a location, an area, which, while 'open' to degrees of manipulation and modification, are nevertheless 'starting points'. Spatiality on the other hand makes apparent the pervasive sense in which signifiers in the physical world like boundaries, use designations of land, transport corridors, and the built environments for services in a rural community for example are very much the result of decisions, of political processes, of traditions, of conventions, of responses to change. Put differently, the resultant spaces (physical and virtual) are constructed through complex interactive processes.

Turning to history, two fundamental questions endemic to it: what happened and why, are especially pertinent because each is a generator of a raft of further questions like: from whose perspective, what kinds of evidence are used to construct 'the version', over what period of time, and for what purposes are the histories being constructed: to justify previous decisions, to prepare the groundwork for future action, to explicate the dominant perspectives which frame the context, and so forth. Both Williams and Davison, in terms of the first purpose, would answer as already stated from a different set of vantage points but, in relation to rural communities, possibly in similar ways. Both may well refer to something like the impacts of change over time and events happening elsewhere: in cities in the case of Williams; with changes in the wider political and economic landscape in the case of Davison. There would also likely be reference to the impact of demography and the relative importance of what is done in rural communities: predominantly economic activity of a primary wealth generation kind dependent on some secondary and tertiary activities to support and sustain it. In terms of why, Williams may tend towards the evocation of the passage of traditions and the rise and rise of capitalist modes of production with the 'inevitable' commodification of people – no longer individuals but human resources. Davison, in contrast, may well argue that since the heyday of rural towns and communities there has been a steady decline due to a cocktail of factors: neglect and loss of political power, conflicts of interest, a rising sense of insecurity as the narrow economic base of many rural communities becomes increasingly challenged by multi-national companies in search of economy of scale locations, and contradictory messages about what should be done to arrest decline.

The preceding paragraph is speculative and based on the references I have cited for each author and my own understanding about the explanatory power of history. In terms of this article, the point I am trying to make is that history is not just about working on and with events, fixtures and dates to form a linear narrative of a 'this happened and then that happened' kind. Rather history has the potential to alert one to macro and micro global and local issues, events, and shaping themes that create contexts for certain kinds of decisions rather than others to be made. Blending the conceptual contributions of space and spatiality with those of history as briefly outlined, I believe is a potentially productive way for developing options for rural sustainability centred on education, broadly conceived. In the next section, the Mapping of Rural Education Communities project in South Australia is outlined, and some results from the first data collection site, the Karoonda Farm Fair, are presented and then analysed in light of the foregoing discussions of space, spatiality and history, with reference to White's (1999) middle ground concept.

MAPPING RURAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The Mapping Rural Education and Communities in South Australia project is a three-year undertaking to collect and analyse views about education and the wellbeing and future of rural communities. The object of the research is to inform future planning and policies for and with rural areas and communities, principally

around the nexus between education and community capacities. Five other rural shows located throughout the state are being used for data collection: Kadina on Yorke Peninsula, Kimba on Eyre Peninsula, Naracoorte in the South East, Loxton in the Riverland, and Burra in the Mid-North. The six rural show locations were selected because they encompass the main regional and primary production areas of the state. Planning has also commenced to collect data from rural school governing councils, the council members of the South Australian Rural Shows Society, and from Regional Development Boards.

The paper-based survey (see Appendix 1), designed to be completed by volunteer respondents in about 10–15 minutes at a typical rural show display and information booth, comprises 27 questions grouped into five areas: Background Information; Accessing Education and Service; Education and Rural Communities; Youth and the Future of Rural Communities; and Personal Snapshots, an opportunity to respond to three open-ended questions. The 18 items in the survey invite a rating of importance response on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 – not important, to 7 – essential. A 7-point rating scale was chosen for the survey because it has a clear mid-point and it provides considerable potential for respondents to discriminate between items. While a study of the survey items may lead to the conclusion that a majority of them are biased towards an essential response, it is important to note that the range of answers on individual items typically encapsulated the whole scale, with responses ranging from 1–7 on many of the items. Similarly, to pre-empt the results, while two of the subscales displayed mean responses of above 6, the third was significantly lower, with a larger standard deviation. These statistics clearly demonstrate that participants were willing and able to utilise the full scale, and supports the assertion that reported levels of concern accurately represent participants' true concern over the issues surrounding rural education and communities. With demographic indications showing a likely continuing decline of population in smaller rural communities, it will be very important to have recent data which quantify and authentically describe two key things in relation to influencing policies that determine access to education in rural areas. Firstly, how strongly rural people feel about the 'local' availability of education and schooling, hence the importance ratings scale. Secondly, how they understand the value and role of education in their communities.

Karoonda Farm Fair

The Karoonda Farm Fair is a 2-day event held annually which attracts “between 10–15 thousand people...with over 350 exhibitors” and has been running for 26 years (Wood, 2010, pp. 1 & 2). A feature of the Karoonda Farm Fair is the Lifestyle Pavilion which is the venue for produce which needs to be sheltered from the weather, and for government departments and regional services information booths. The Mapping research project was located in the Pavilion and staffed by experienced data collectors, together with a Flinders University information officer. There was pre-publicity of the research via regional radio and press, school bulletins and through the District Council. Respondents were invited to complete the survey as they

walked past the Mapping booth. The voluntary nature of the invitation was stressed to all participants. Chairs, pencils and writing surfaces were provided to facilitate completion of the survey and the gift of a pen was offered for taking the time to do so. Children were offered a sweet while parents participated.

Mapping Results—Quantitative

A complete analysis of the data collected at the Karoonda Farm Fair will not be undertaken until the end of 2010 or early 2011 when data from all of the rural shows and other data sources have been collected. However, in the following section is the main statistical and descriptive analysis of the Karoonda data completed to date. I want to recognise here the important contributions of Dr. Aaron Drummond, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, for his statistical work, and Marja van Breda, Administration and Research Assistant, for her work with the qualitative data. Both are members of the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities at Flinders University.

Over the two days of the Karoonda Farm Fair, 374 people accepted the invitation to respond to the survey – 261 male and 111 female (2 did not declare). Of the 374 respondents, 289 said they mainly think of themselves as a country person, 22 as a city person, and 62 as mainly a country and a city person. The purpose of seeking this declaration was to see if there were differences in the item responses according to how people think of themselves. The overall results show there were virtually no differences between those who identified as country, city, or mainly country and city across all the rating items, and 95% of survey results were between 5.3 and 7 on a 7-point scale – see Table 1.

I Think of Myself As...	Mean rating of items/7	Standard Deviation
A country person	6.2	0.5
A city person	6.2	0.6
A country & a city person	6.2	0.5

Table 1: Respondent Personal Identification

Country and Country/City people had lived in the country for an average of 40 years; the least amount of time reported was 3 years, with the most being 80 years. Living in the country longer was indicative of greater overall concern about the local availability of primary and pre-school services but less concern about access to internet services. Table 2 shows how long people saw themselves continuing to live in a rural community (9 respondents did record for this question):

Years	> 10	10	5	<5	NA
How many	209	51	23	45	39

Table 2: How long people saw themselves living in a rural community and frequency

As stated above, the Mapping Survey comprises five sections, three of which invite respondents to rate a total of 18 items. Table 3 is a summary of the ratings for each section:

Section/Score	Accessing Education Services	Education and Rural Communities	Youth and Future of Rural Communities
Mean/7	6.5	6.3	5.8
Standard Deviation	0.6	0.5	0.7

Table 3: Mean Importance Scores for Survey Sections

Males ($M = 6.0$, $SD = 0.6$) were slightly less concerned over issues than females ($M = 6.3$, $SD = 0.4$), this difference being reliable, given $t(143.78) = 4.36$, $p < .01$. Given that fewer males participated, this difference may be greater in the general population, with fewer males responding perhaps due to the tendency for them to have less concern for rural education issues or not wanting, for whatever reason, to spend time to completing the survey.

Of the 374 participants, 366 responded to the question regarding the importance of children in rural communities being able to access primary education without travelling more than an hour each way daily. This issue produced the equal highest mean perceived importance, $M = 6.7$, $SD = 0.8$. Also of high perceived importance was the issue of students being able to access secondary education without leaving home, which was given a mean importance rating of 6.1 ($SD = 0.9$). It may be inferred that the locality of rural schools is therefore critical to rural communities. In a time of increasing economic rationalism (Orchard, 1998), as more schools are consolidated into larger area and district schools, it is therefore important to consider the consequences of any further such moves within the rural primary and secondary education system. If the perceived importance of local education translates into people leaving rural areas in order to maintain local education access, any move to consolidate rural schools further may result in the exodus of people from rural areas and spell the collapse of rural communities without access to such facilities.

Equalling the importance of access to primary education was the result for well qualified teachers, with a reading of 6.7 and a SD of 0.6. The lowest mean importance rating was scored for the importance of teacher turnover: 5.3 with a SD of 1.2. Both of these appear to focus on two core issues for rural education (they also apply in my experience to so-called hard to staff urban schools), attracting teachers who are qualified to teach the classes/subjects assigned to them and also retaining them, especially when they have begun to 'put down roots' and become part of the community.

In somewhat of a contrast, 361 respondents rated encouraging young people to think about living locally when they had finished their education and training with a mean of 5.3 and a SD of 1.2, indicating a wider spread of views about this item.

However, a mean of 6.4 (SD = 0.9) was recorded for how important it is for the future of a rural community to have young people who want to be a part of the community. These seemingly contradictory responses may indicate that while it is not considered as important for youth to *live* in rural areas, the future of rural communities will likely rely upon youth involvement in rural communities, through work, education and community engagement. It is likely that youth who live in regional centres continue to make important contributions to rural communities. One way of involving youth in a rural community is retaining them through the continued availability of quality schooling locally to the end of Year 12.

Mapping Results—Qualitative

There are 4 questions in the Mapping survey which invite participants to write a response rather than assign a rating. Responses to each of the questions have been categorised into 6 groups, derived from an analysis of what respondents wrote. Illustrations of what respondents said in each of the categories are presented in two ways to assist with readability: as a group of words or short phrases/statements where quotation marks have not been used, and as longer, direct quotations. Due to the disparate nature of responses, for each question an ‘other’ category has been used as a holding bay until further data have been collected at the other shows and from other sources. It may also be that the groupings as used in this article change as the research project progresses.

The first open question is: *Briefly describe how where you live has influenced your thinking about rural communities.* Responses to this question fall broadly into six groups: Community Living, Environment and Climate, Perceptions of City versus Country, Economical influences, Rural lifestyle, and Other. Figure 1 shows the frequency of responses in each of the groups graphically.

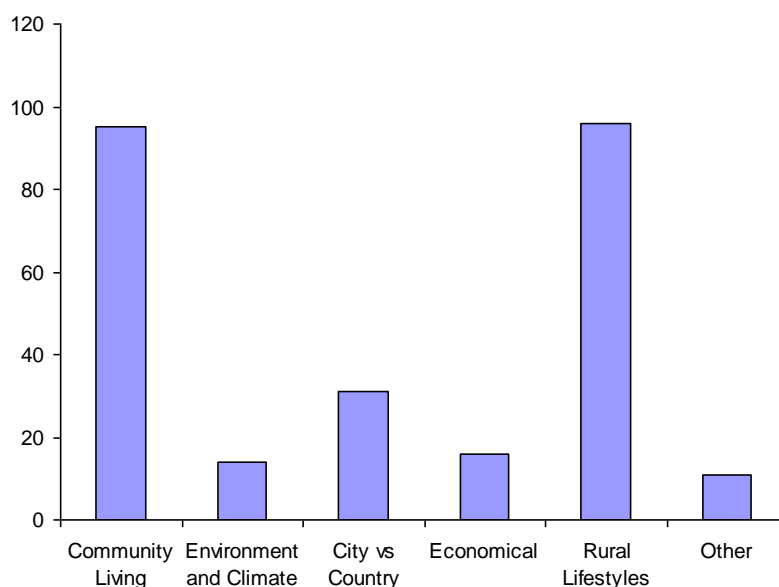


Figure 1: Descriptions of where people live that influence thinking about rural communities. 374 survey participants. 263 item responses. 70% response rate.

Approximately 70% of participants responded to this question. After reading through the responses, six broad categories were identified. The greatest number of participants commented on the type of lifestyle that was experienced in rural settings, closely followed by the feelings associated with being part of a rural community. Thirdly, participants noted the perceived differences between rural life and city living. The economy of rural living relates to ideas about what is lacking and what needs to be financially supported. Environment and climate was noted by participants who experienced how these had an impact on rural life and communities.

Rural Lifestyle encompasses aspects of rural living, i.e. what it is and what it has to offer (or not). Words used by respondents here include: freedom, family farm, hard working, rewarding, boring, always lived there, gossip, diminishing, narrow, aware of rural issues. Some quotes that best describe this category include: "I've been involved in local communities all my life"; "I've lived there all my life so I don't know any better"; "more resilient"; "have travelled extensively and now I find rural/country people can be very narrow minded and intolerant"; "great place to raise a family"; "farming and long distances".

Community Living focuses primarily on relationships. Words and phrases that were most frequently mentioned include: close knit, community orientated, good neighbours, everyone knows each other, helping each other, knowing difficulties, supporting. Some quotes taken from the survey that more fully describe these relationships are: "small communities are strong and resilient, straight-talking and supportive"; "rural communities are a better, safer place for myself and my family"; "a strong sense of community, so I feel like I belong".

City vs. Country relates to perceived preferences and perceptions of difference between them. Some quotes that describe these include: "always lived in the country and town makes me feel claustrophobic"; "always lived in the city – rural areas seem so remote with limited job opportunities, particularly for women"; "as a city person I don't have a good understanding"; "balance is important – opportunity of both 'worlds'".

Economical influences saw concerns mentioned about school closures, lack of job opportunities, big industry leaving the district, need for services, and young people moving away. Some quotes that describe concerns include: "lack of access to services and facilities"; "rural people should be helped to obtain further education"; "there isn't a bus to connect to an area or high school".

Environment and Climate encompassed how these have an influence on the life of a rural community. Words that were mentioned include: understanding, appreciating it, drought and weather. Some quotes that more fully describe the environmental influences include: "drought has affected the community lifestyle"; "makes me

better understand food production and the environment / water”; “appreciate every drop of rain now”.

Other comments included: “not sure”; “try to give them updates”; “everything”.

Responses to the second question, *What do you really value about education in your rural community?* were also grouped into six categories as shown in Figure 2.

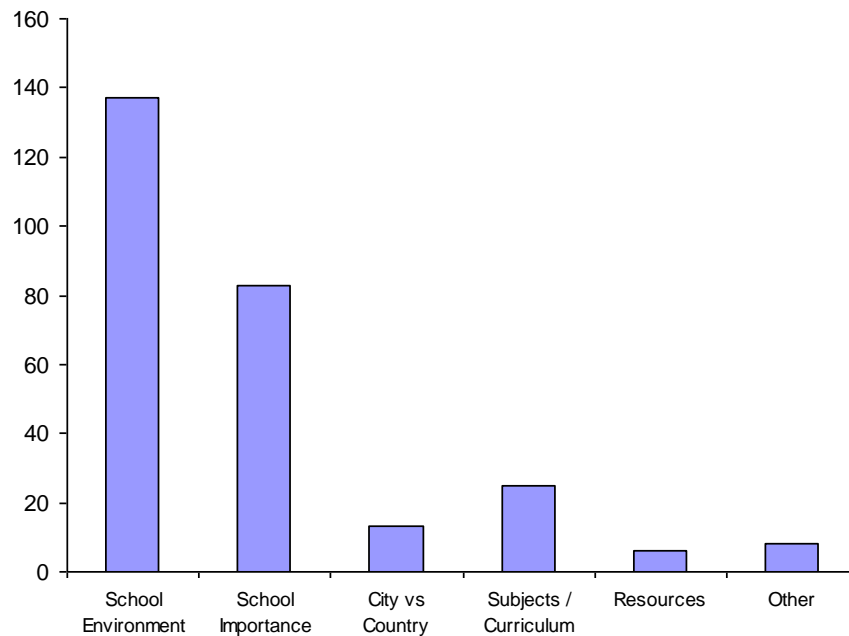


Figure 2: What participants valued about education in rural communities. 374 survey participants. 272 item responses. 73% response rate.

Approximately 73% of participants responded to this question. After reading through the responses, six broad categories were identified. A significant number of participants commented on valuing the school environment and its relationships. The second most significant category indicates the importance participants placed on having a school presence in a rural community. Thirdly, participants valued the range of subjects and the curriculum that are available to students. The next category indicates perceived differences between city vs. country education, and lastly participants valued readily available educational resources in their community.

School Environment primarily focuses on relationships. Most frequently mentioned by respondents include: small classes, one on one teaching, everyone knows each other, friendly, community values, bonds between teachers and students, good teachers, easy access to coaching. Some quotes that describe these relationships include: “small schools where all students and teachers and parents know each other”; “very personal knowledge of students”; “everyone knows each other and interacts socially and at an education level and having education rurally is essential”; “sense of belonging, small classes in secondary”; “I value having teachers

spend more 1 on 1 time (less students)”; “quality teachers are country minded, to understand the different activities children are involved in at home”.

School Importance is about the significance a school has to a rural community. Some phrases from the data include: hub of community, keeps community alive and together, knows what rural means, keeps families together. Other contributions include: “keeps young people in town”; “the school is a major part of the community”; “not have to travel long distances”; “it is often rural based eg agriculture a subject that is often experienced first hand”; “being able to keep the children living at home”; “takes the local environment into consideration”; “I value that education is available in our rural community”.

Subjects / Curriculum is about choices and availability of subjects in rural setting. Words that describe these from the data include: high standard, rural based, personalised, flexibility and diversity. Quotes include: “subjects that are personalised and lead to getting good jobs”; “broad spectrum of subjects”; “I value the opportunity to access a range of curriculum choices”; “that agriculture is being offered at our local college and high school”; “that it provides curriculum for all students, eg academic as well as VET and SBA [school based assessment]”.

City vs. Country is where participants mentioned perceived differences between them. Statements made by respondents include: should be same, worse off for country kids, education should be for both, good to be away from pressures of city life. Some quotes include: “they’re entitled to equal education to city”; “it shows you how limited students are in the country compared to city students”; “less city influence”.

Resources focused on the availability of distance education, open access and the local library in their rural community. Quotes include: “accessibility and appropriate facilities”; “we do not miss out on other subjects because we have the option to do open access”; “broad band education equips students for a wide range of skills”.

Other comments include: “n/a I am a nanna”; “more disadvantage than advantage”; “common sense has more value than education”.

The responses to the third question, *What is one thing about education you would like to see improved?* generated the following groupings of responses: Teaching and Teachers, Curriculum, Services and Resources, Higher Education, Funding and Other. The response frequencies are shown in Figure 3.

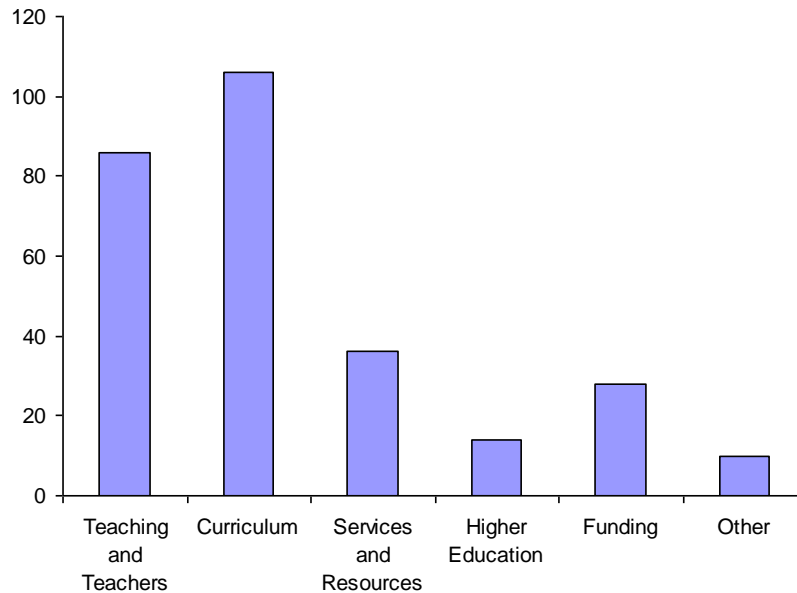


Figure 3: What participants liked to see improved about education. 374 survey participants. 280 item responses. 75% item response rate.

Approximately 75% of participants responded to this question. After reading through the responses, six broad categories were identified. The most significant category is in the area of curriculum. The second most significant group relates to teaching and teachers. Thirdly, participants would like to see improvement in services and resources, followed by a need for financial support for schools and students. Finally, participants mentioned the need to have better access to higher education.

The availability and accessibility to **Curriculum** was the main category that participants identified as needing to improve. Words and phrases associated with this included: the three 'r's, more variety, agriculture, health and fitness, less relying on the internet and technology, Aboriginal culture and knowledge, teach life skills, open learning, distance education. Some quotes are: "basic reading and writing"; "access to more subjects"; "more subject choices"; "to learn basics, reading and writing, arithmetic, plus modern education"; "greater awareness of rural problems"; "variety of open access class secondary level"; "more learning about Australia and towns"; "availability of trade courses"; "more emphasise placed on agriculture as an important subject to learn".

In the **Teaching and Teachers** area participants mainly focussed on improvements that are needed including some of the following: more qualified teachers, teachers to stay longer, get rid of dead wood, not first stop or last stop teachers, teachers who work *and* live in the community, more individual training, better male/female teachers balance, city to experience country life—students and teachers, teachers teaching subjects they know, discipline. Some quotes regarding teaching and

teachers are: “secondary teachers actually being qualified to teach the subject they are teaching”; “rotation of teachers, continuity of education”; “more face to face teachers in upper secondary classes”; “understanding rural situations that students are living through”; “smaller class sizes or no mix of years e.g. my kids in R1/2 and 2/3/4”; “teachers living in areas they work in”; “young teachers staying longer, more teachers in rural schools”; “quality specialised teachers, teaching in all schools, offering a variety of subjects to suit their interest and learning style”.

Services and Resources relates to improving the accessibility and availability of support services and resources, such as: better bus services, special education needs, pre-schools, should be the same as in the city, more computers, better facilities, internet. Some quotes note the following: “greater access and variety – special needs students more attention”; “extra SSO help and hours”; “access to new technology”; “more use of community skills”; “retention of small rural schools-increased facilities within these i.e. computer, tech studies, web classrooms”.

In the category of **Funding** participants pointed out the need for government assistance and support within the schools and for the students, for example: support rural schools not close them down, money for rural students who go to city for university, more teachers to assist with learning difficulties, not reduce education support. Some quotes are: “greater opportunities for students who are gifted or high achievers rather than focus funding on the lower end all the time”; “not reduced”; “the availability of Youth Allowance immediately after year 12”; “funding for schools”; “more grants available and hands on experience from city people”; “free for all – cut back on military spending”; “public schools to have the same facilities as private schools”.

Higher education is what needs to be improved regarding accessibility and availability, for example: better career paths offered, university in the bush, access to VET, access to university courses that suit rural settings, more tertiary opportunities. Some quotes are: “that country kids wanting tertiary education are not disadvantaged in comparison to their city cousins”; “higher education being more accommodating of students in the country who do not have access to resources, subjects and teachers that may occur in the city”; “if higher education is directed to the needs of the community we would keep young ones here”.

Other comments include: “lunch times”; “not sure”; “can’t think of anything”.

Question 4 invited respondents to consider, *Is there anything else you would like to say about rural education and communities?* Figure 4 has the frequency details for the tabulation of responses into Funding, Community, Education, Services and Resources, City versus Country and Other.

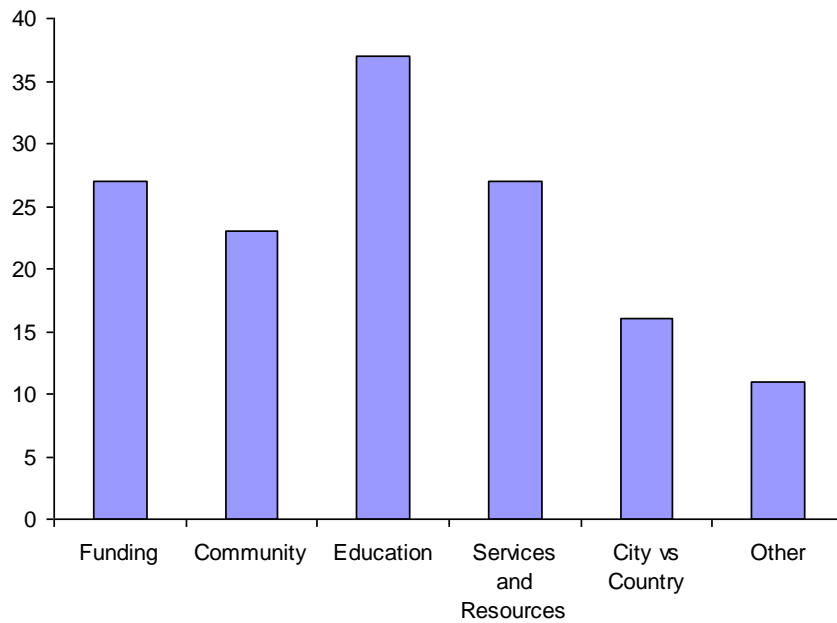


Figure 4: Additional comments about rural education and communities. 374 survey participants. 141 item responses. 38% response rate.

Approximately 38% of participants responded to this question. After reading through the responses, six broad categories were identified. The most significant mentioned is within the area of education. This was followed by an equal amount of participants adding their perspectives to the categories of services and resources, and funding. Community is the next category that participants added to, and perceived differences between city vs. country was least mentioned.

Education broadly incorporates participants' appreciation of the importance of having a local rural school. Included here were: teaching, great staff, what kids need, size of schools, school needs to be in the community, important for future, not lose young ones. Some quotes are: "I have only taught in country schools—mainly area schools—and have felt that the school is a vital part of the community"; "if you get good small schools, with supporting teachers, communities work well"; "rural communities will thrive on better quality education—it is essential for our future"; "smaller classes are fantastic—most people from Karoonda succeed and find either traineeships, apprenticeships or go to uni"; "in some cases, no school, no country"; "quality teachers should be encouraged and rewarded".

Funding relates to areas of financial need and support. Words that describe these are: scholarships, university costs, local school support, special education, no staff cuts. Some quotes from respondents: "The cuts in staff with schools with lower numbers HURTS the children most"; "better accommodation for city students to have rural placements"; "more scholarships"; "important after secondary school—living away from home assistance for all students who move away"; "more funding

needed for special ed children”; “keep the rural schools going and hope that funding becomes more readily available as these young people are our future”.

Services and Resources relates to what services and resources may be needed in a rural community. Words used are: buses, diversity, volunteers, higher education, adult classes, pre-school, VET. Some quotes that more fully describe the needs are: “more bus services to help students”; “as a whole require to improve the services available otherwise the towns will effectively die in the long term”; “more national input”; “we are very lucky to have the services we have for our children”; “rural students are entitled to choice, exposure and affordability as much as anyone else”; “bring university to the rural communities – why go to Adelaide to learn about agriculture?”.

Community relates to what it is like to live in a rural community, and includes the following comments: the community supports the school, friendliness, work opportunities, close network. Some quotes include: “rural communities are a great place to grow up and live and work in”; “need for understanding when country communities decline”; “essential part of our future”; “friendly community, and lots of encouragement”; “we have a great network here”; “a great place to grow if there is community support”.

City vs. Country comments relate to perceived differences. Words mentioned are: better than, who do they think they are, equal to, government only relates to cities, good for kids to go to city. Some quotes include: “they should be the same quality as city”; “essential for rural students to have same opportunities as city children”; “keep trying to improve and to stand up to bureaucrats informing our practitioners”; “government is full of promise but no commitment to our children’s education and community”; “rural education has an advantage over city students as they have the best of both worlds – learning from the land and also from schools”.

Other comments include “thank you for the opportunity”; “it’s great”; “keep up the good work”; “it’s great mate!”; “surveys like this are great to get people to recognise rural education”.

In the next section, I attempt to show how ideas about space, spatiality, perspectives of history and findings from the Karoonda Farm Fair can be used to think about rural community sustainability and what might be done to progress it. Before doing this however, I want to emphasise a form of history that can be overlooked when considering education in a rural community and sustainability – that is the lived experience of individuals like those who responded to the survey. As stated earlier, the majority of respondents to the Karoonda Farm Fair survey think of themselves as country people and have lived in the country for an average of forty years. This is a potentially very large local historical resource for engaging in the work of creating sustainable rural communities. In some instances, this resource reaches back to early white settlement of the area through narratives and records of relatives and others. Or as Williams writes about change drawing on inspiration from Wordsworth: “we

can retreat, for security, into a deep subjectivity, or we can look around us for social pictures, social signs, social messages, to which characteristically, we try to relate as individuals but so as to discover, in some form, community" (1973, p.295).

SPACE, SPATIALITY AND HISTORY

Almost without exception, the availability of education for the survey respondents means their children can access a physical structure – a school or a pre-school – on a daily basis without a major sense of struggle or inconvenience. Put another way, education space, typically a school or a pre-school, is synonymous with community, not in the sense of this is all that is needed for a community to be and to function, but in the sense of without a school or a pre-school we either do not have a community or, at the very least, the spaces we need to maintain and develop our community. As alluded to above, associated with this is the over time in response to changes in enrolment, views about teaching, learning and curriculum, funding, technology and so forth. The personal historical record in terms of what has been available and what is lived experience and memories of respondents who have had access to a school, albeit perhaps one that has varied required for continuity intersects with space for a designated purpose like a school. In addition to giving prominence to education in a rural community as space – reflecting on the size and range of facilities of a school for say 150 students helps ground the physical (and other) impact and presence of education space – there is also in the survey responses extensive reference to spatiality – to how education space precipitates and nurtures communal life, communal hopes and aspirations, communal day to day living. To the question, what do you really value about education in your rural community, respondents said the school is the "hub of the community... keeps community alive and together... keeps families together". Space, spatiality and history as conceptual lenses also assist to illuminate another very topical issue in rural communities, the time students have to spend travelling to school.

Few issues in a rural community raise more discussion, at times very animated, than how much time students should spend travelling to school each day. The issue of travel time to school is a critical one in rural communities. This is clearly supported by the mean importance rating of 6.7/7 for the question, *How important is it for children who live in rural communities, to be able to access primary education without travelling for more than one hour each way daily?* For most students who do not live in rural townships, the time they have to spend travelling to school basically depends on how far they have to travel, the nature of the journey – does it for example include a ferry crossing or is it subject to frequent detours due to flooding – and the mode of transport used, which in this discussion is limited to school buses and the overall design of bus routes.

School bus routes have a very physical impact on the landscape. They traverse distance and space, they cover territory and they connect one location with another. Because of legal safety requirements school bus routes impact on the design and form of roads and road surfaces, signage requirements and speed limits as well.

While routes may appear to be very physical and to a degree 'given' – depart from the school and drive 20 kilometres east down the main road, then turn right onto the dirt road and travel for 24 kilometres before veering left for 11.5 kilometres and connecting back with the main road to return to the school – school bus routes are also very complex instances of spatiality, of socially constructed space. There are several interrelated dimensions to this.

First there is the accumulated history of land use from the time of an original survey through to the present and any future land use designations, determined in part by the physical attributes of location and the socially constructed views about how meeting a service need – the timely transport of students to school for example – ought to occur. When the Mallee region of South Australia was first surveyed for settlement, like elsewhere at the time, making provision for motorised school transport was not 'on the planning radar', in the same way that provision for the National Broadband Network was likely 'not on the planning radar' when the national Overseas Telecommunications Network was built in the second half of the last century. As developments emerge, such as school bus transport, infrastructure to support it is a blend of purpose-specific elements and the incorporation and adaptation of existing arrangements. The particular outcomes, the routes that buses travel, are ultimately the product of decisions about how to ensure students can access a school by negotiating and traversing space.

As quoted earlier from Soja (1989), focussing on the physical dimensions of space can mask the richness of space also being socially constructed – put in concrete terms in relation to school bus travel – a decision to terminate a bus outside the farm gate of one family but, for another, the bus stops 6 kilometres from home with perhaps some form of private travel allowance to complete the journey. While it may be argued that the foregoing comes down to the most cost effective way of transporting the most students to a school, this in itself further masks another question: why one family to a farm gate but not another family in order to deliver overall economies of scale? The location of bus routes are replete with considerations that are deeply social in nature and, further, also political both in terms of local contexts and wider, such as state-wide regulations that provide the overall framing for what may occur locally.

The historical contribution of accessing schooling in terms of school bus routes has been mentioned but there are some other points to make in relation to the purpose of this article. It is common practice in rural communities to name school bus routes by district or location(s) serviced within the wider area. Naming, once it is done and has become embedded, assumes a status, a 'life', and begins to produce and accumulate a history. While rarely is the history written down as a comprehensive narrative, typically there are formal records held by schools of meetings of various bus route committees and transport committees of overall school councils or parent bodies. In addition, as often happens with designated groups with formal responsibility for services, there is an official record of deliberations and decisions and also an informal record which individuals have, embellish and share with others. The formal

and the informal records and traditions and stories of place involving bus routes, which may include a defining event such as a bushfire where particular school buses and their drivers played an important role which had a significant impact on how the event affected a community, builds a history which, while socially constructed, is nevertheless real. Put another way, historical information of the kind I have briefly described is contextually rich, contextually significant and consequently, as quoted earlier from Davison (2005), “[o]nly by excavating [knowing about and valuing] the past can we begin to appraise the depth and prospects for sustainability...sustainability is not only an economic, demographic and environmental concept; it is also a historical concept...” (p. 39).

MIDDLE GROUND

Finally, a few thoughts on the concept of the middle ground from the work of Richard White (1999 & 2010) and how it may be of relevance to rural sustainability in light of the inputs and discussion about space, spatiality, history and data collected from the Karoonda Farm Fair. At a surface level, the idea of the middle ground might otherwise be called compromise, a word frequently used in negotiations between individuals, interest groups, businesses, lobbyists, political parties and many others. Another way of representing its character at a surface level would be to talk about ‘give and take’ or in the vernacular, ‘horse trading’. While each of these captures something of the essence of the middle ground, there is more to its depth and relevance as I understand it for the sustainability of rural communities and the role(s) that education might play in this.

White’s (1999) middle ground concept has its origins in his research and writing about the complex, dynamic relationships and rivalries between the Native American Indians of the Great Lakes region and the French, British and Americans from the middle of the seventeenth century until the 1812 war. While it is true that the will of the Native Americans was eventually overcome, the middle ground process in the lead up to this eventuality remains instructive. The heart of the middle ground is a willingness of parties to recognise that there are spaces, physically and socially constructed, that are beyond and other than the ‘home bases’ of each, and which are productive for progressing their own agendas. In White’s words, the middle ground is “a process that arose from the ‘willingness of those who... [sought] to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner’s cultural premises’” (White, 2010, p. 1). Further, “[a]ny congruence [between parties], no matter how tenuous, can be put to work and can take on a life of its own if it is accepted by both sides” (White, 2010, p. 1). Through the process of working together, the exploration and discussion of what White calls misunderstandings, “new meanings and through them new practice – the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground [emerge]” (Lear, 2006, p. 30).

While White's middle ground is a product of "a quite particular historical space" (2010, p. 1) it is instructive for exploring what is required to optimise the sustainability of rural communities and specifically one like Karoonda. While retention of assets—human, built, cultural, economic and natural—is fundamental so that there is a base from which to work, placing the burden exclusively on them runs the risk of not nurturing spaces for other assets to emerge. The middle ground focuses on creating physical spaces and socially constructed spaces: contexts for exploring ideas which Soja would assert do not pressure for premature closure and that foster "continuously expand[ing] the production of knowledge beyond what is presently known" or possible, if constrained by current policies and practices (1996, p. 61). Research findings from the Karoonda Farm Fair, particularly those which emphasise the importance of local access to education, frame how using the middle ground idea could help to progress *The Future* of rural communities.

Firstly, spaces have to be created or discovered where continuous conversations about the school can occur freely. Contexts which encourage ideas and the open debate and discussion of them are essential. Some basic procedural agreements like: all voices are heard, thinking that is tangential to the expected is encouraged, and the temptation to say we have tried that before and it did not work is resisted to give a fledgling idea time to germinate and push a few shoots through the ground.

Secondly, leaders and communities who value rural schools and the roles they might play in sustaining communities need to clarify and embrace what it is they believe is required for sustainability, in relation to what others, in this instance centralised services and bureaucracies, believe is required. The purpose of this is to identify points of commonality and points of disagreement. This process generates the bodies of knowledge around which the search for something other than the status quo can occur. Or paraphrasing White (2010), it is about making visible misunderstandings and using them as the basis for producing something new. A key piece of contextual intelligence that local participants need to internalise is that closure of schools is most frequently driven by falling enrolments and a belief that students who remain can receive a better education by moving their enrolment to some other location, real or virtual or a combination of both. This means that securing the school so that it can be the hub in perpetuity has to be a major focus of their contributions. Paradoxically though, if this focus is driven too hard or at the exclusion of all others, it will negate or at least reduce the potential fertility of the middle ground. Why? Because a fundamental tenet of the middle ground is that it is more an organic space where nurturing and growth are the main characteristics, rather than a mechanistic space governed by rules and fixed agendas.

Thirdly, for the middle ground to evolve and to function as a process there needs to be some equivalence of influence and power between the parties. This is a seminal outcome of White's research. Expressed in his words, there needs to be "a rough balance of power, mutual need or desire for what the other possesses, and an inability by either side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to change" (2010, p. 1). Put another way from the perspective of a rural community, focusing on

developing and maintaining bonding social capital *and* bridging social capital is vital (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). As well it means clearly defining what it is that the community has that others need, and persistently and consistently advocating this. In other words, the indispensable benefits of sustainability have to be trumpeted. In addition, engaging explicitly in politics at all levels of government and through formal and informal means is required. Continuous monitoring and assessing the risk of doing this is also required because, while White's middle ground research was set in a context where violence and physical force were present, which is not germane to the context under discussion here, "the critical element...of creating and maintaining a middle ground ... is mediation", which is integral to the ways the political process operates in Australia.

CONCLUSION

Sustaining rural communities is paradoxically relatively straight forward- retain people and the services they require- and also very complex and problematic- engage with and respond to the outflow of youth and the impacts of globalisation. Concurrent with this, ensuring there are diverse and numerous vibrant, productive rural communities has never been a more urgent priority in terms of Australia's sustainability. National and international population growth and the attendant consequences of these are the core reasons for asserting the urgency of the priority. Education is a profoundly important human activity for nurturing and releasing capacities and imagination to construct, energise and drive what is necessary to transition our nation to a 'sustainable state'. This being the case, focussing on how to best retain and revitalise education in rural communities is critical. The voices of the Farm Fair are clear and consistent about this. Moving into fields that may not be as familiar as others like space, spatiality and alternative perspectives of history, presents challenges and opportunities to develop new conceptual tools for working towards sustainable rural communities and sustainability. Finally, the middle ground: while it is an idea derived from clashes and negotiations from much earlier times, I believe it is instructive for reframing how rural communities engage with others about *The Future*. As White (2010) asserts, "[b]iased and incomplete information and creative misunderstanding may be the most common basis of human [inter]actions ... [and] [a]ny congruence, no matter how tenuous, can be put to work and can take on a life of its own if it is accepted by both sides" (pp. 1 & 3).

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