

THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM: EXCELLENCE OR EQUITY. A RURAL PERSPECTIVE

Aaron Drummond

*School of Education
(Flinders University)*

ABSTRACT

"The Australian Curriculum promotes excellence and equity in education." (ACARA, 2012a, p. 1)

In 2008 it was agreed by the Australian Education Ministers that a national curriculum be implemented with the rationale that it would help to ensure high quality education for all young Australians (ACARA, 2012b). One reason for the shift to a standardised national curriculum is so that "School and curriculum authorities can collaborate to ensure high quality teaching and learning materials are available for all schools." (ACARA, 2012b, p. 1, emphasis added). The Australian curriculum represents a huge shift in the manner in which education is legislated and delivered in Australia. Though there are benefits to the implementation of a national curriculum, there are also a variety of challenges.

What does the implementation of the Australian Curriculum mean for non-metropolitan schools?

The statement by ACARA is indicative that rural schools will benefit equally from the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. However, some unique characteristics of rural areas mean that additional support may be required to ensure the successful implementation of a national curriculum in rural areas. Difficulty with accessing resources in rural areas may result in further challenges for rural schools. To support a nationwide implementation process that results in an equitable curriculum for all Australian children irrespective of their location, it may be necessary to differentiate support to rural and metropolitan schools.

Drawing upon two surveys, one on the Australian Curriculum in rural areas previously published in Curriculum Perspectives and the other a survey of both rural and metropolitan school leaders on the implementation process, I explore the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in rural contexts. Although rural school leaders are overall supportive of the Australian curriculum, they do express dissatisfaction with the implementation process, specifically with the support they are receiving.

The delay in the implementation of the Australian Curriculum appears to have resulted in marginally higher funding for non-metropolitan schools, but the overall funds available are both objectively and subjectively low. In order to ensure that the implementation of the Australian Curriculum is successful and

remedying (c.f. enhancing) rural inequities, much more needs to be done to support its implementation in non-metropolitan schools.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian curriculum, once implemented, will regulate the teaching of content in Australian schools more than any other time in history. In 2011, the Australian Curriculum implementation process was delayed to ensure that the curriculum was successfully implemented across all states and territories. Given that the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) indicates that one reason for implementing the Australian curriculum is to ensure excellence and equity in education (ACARA, 2012a), the present research seeks to explore whether these goals are being achieved focusing on rural and remote schools.

From as early as 1987, scholars were considering the merits and drawbacks of the implementation of an Australian Curriculum. Hannan (1987) indicates the tensions at the time of writing between specific content and political ideology. In Hannan's view, although most educators were generally supportive of an Australian Curriculum, tensions arose between whether the curriculum should be liberal or conservative in philosophy. Of critical importance was Hannan's observation that the dominant opinion emphasised that a national curriculum be both skills and school based – that is, general skills should be taught by every school, but that the cultural content be selected by individual schools (Hannan, 1987).

Twenty five years later the scholarly debate as to the importance of context remains current. Place-based pedagogy approaches emphasise the importance on the context in which content is taught (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003; McNerney, Smyth & Down, 2011). Although a rich debate could be entered into as to how place-based pedagogy and the Australian Curriculum might interact, such is not the purpose of the present paper. Given that the Australian Curriculum is already undergoing implementation, the aim of the present paper is to investigate the implementation process, particularly within the context of rural¹ schools.

Why might rural schools experience exacerbated or different issues with regard to the implementation process? A wealth of literature illuminates the distinct qualities of rural areas (Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2011; Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2012; Barbour, 2011; Curtis, 2011; Lock, Reid & White, 2011). Such unique qualities can include limited resources, and pressures to amalgamate services (Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2012). In terms of schooling, rural teachers may need to travel further for professional development (PD) activities, rural schools may have difficulties with accessing relief staff to allow teachers to attend PD events, and increased costs may occur due to the need to reimburse travel expenses, produce relevant learning materials, and engage in whole class teaching in rural contexts where multi-grade classes are more prevalent (Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2012; Halsey, 2009).

INTRODUCTION OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

To examine the potential effects of implementing the Australian Curriculum on rural schools, one must look to a similar event in recent history – the introduction of the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom. Following the Education Reform Act of 1988, the United Kingdom introduced a nation-wide standardised curriculum, similar in many respects to the Australian Curriculum (Vulliamy & Webb, 1995). The UK National Curriculum resulted in some specific difficulties pertaining to the implementation of the National Curriculum in rural areas and small school contexts which were not identified until after the curriculum implementation process had occurred (Galton, Hargreaves & Comber, 1998; Hargreaves, Comber & Galton, 1996; Vulliamy & Webb, 1995). Of particular importance was the under-resourcing of small schools (as typically occur in rural contexts), resulting in inefficient and ineffective curriculum implementation (Vulliamy & Webb, 1995). Curriculum planning and the preparation of policy documents were considered to be more difficult in rural contexts because of the lower staff numbers and poorer resourcing of schools. The need for rural schools to engage in more whole class teaching under the UK national curriculum was also problematic given the difficulties associated with whole class teaching in multi-grade classrooms which are more common in rural schools (Galton et al., 1998).

As the issues in rural areas of the UK were not observed until after the implementation of the National Curriculum had occurred, policymakers were forced to react to, rather than prevent, such difficulties. Fortunately, Australian policymakers presently have the opportunity to foresee such problems, and prevent, rather than respond, to them. In order to do this however, policymakers must be presented with current and accurate data regarding the implementation process.

Thus, the present paper seeks to explore the following questions: How supportive are rural schools of the Australian Curriculum? Are rural schools adequately resourced to implement the Australian Curriculum? In the view of school leaders, what additional resources are required to implement the Australian curriculum effectively? Herein I use data from a survey of rural school leaders published in *Curriculum Perspectives* (Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2012), and a comparative survey on the implementation process in rural and urban areas to explore, and provide some answers to these questions.

A DISCUSSION OF THE CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVES DATA

As a first step in exploring rural perspectives on the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, my colleagues and I conducted a survey in the second half of 2010 (Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2012). The survey was conducted prior to a delay in the implementation process, at which time the curriculum was scheduled to be implemented in 2011. The survey asked rural school leaders to indicate their

agreement with a range of statements about the Australian Curriculum on a seven point scale (1, *strongly disagree* – 7, *strongly agree*). Questions were grouped into three factors – how worthwhile participants believed the Australian Curriculum to be, how much consultation and resourcing had been given to participants, and how much knowledge rural teachers and parents had about the implications and impact of an Australian Curriculum.

Forty-four school leaders responded to the survey. The results painted a relatively grim picture of the position rural schools found themselves in with regard to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. School leaders were, on average, undecided to mildly negative about how worthwhile they perceived the Australian Curriculum to be. Furthermore, they indicated they had received little consultation and few resources for the implementation process. Principals largely disagreed with the notion that rural teachers and parents knew what the implications of the curriculum were, or that rural teachers knew enough to teach the curriculum.

One interesting finding of this survey was that there was general agreement with the statement that a degree of autonomy in the curriculum implementation was important. It appears that even today, at least among non-metropolitan residents, the mainstream opinion about the autonomy of curriculum remains similar to that of 1987 (Hannan, 1987).

The written feedback section of the survey further indicated insufficient resources available to schools to implement the curriculum. The lack of resource availability for implementation was mentioned in more than one third of all respondents' comments. The lack of resources were not entirely financial, with a lack of professional development, staffing and time being mentioned by some participants.

A number of respondents also used the section about the potential benefits of the Australian Curriculum to raise further negative issues. Perhaps most noteworthy were responses indicating that remote schools had little to gain from the introduction of a national curriculum framework, and that the curriculum was a backward step for education.

The data were subsequently published in early 2012 (Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2012). While the data were indicative of a range of issues relating to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in rural areas, during the publication process a major shift in the implementation process occurred – the curriculum implementation was delayed until 2013. Recognising that the delay in implementation might offer an opportunity to rectify some of the issues identified in our earlier work, we used the delay to further investigate the post-delay implementation process.

The data presented in Curriculum Perspectives also left several important questions unanswered. If rural principals were indicating that few resources had been made available to them, what did this mean in objective terms? How much money and

time had been spent on and with their schools individually for the purpose of implementing the Australian Curriculum? Further, were resourcing shortages genuinely due to the schools being rural, or was the lack of resourcing common to both rural and metropolitan schools? These questions were explored in a second survey conducted in the first half of 2012.

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

In the first half of 2012, rural and metropolitan school leaders were contacted through a network of principals to participate in a survey regarding the Australian Curriculum's implementation process. The survey consisted of five sections. The first section asked participants to give some demographic information as well as information about their school. One of the questions asked participants to identify their school type as either metropolitan, or one of a range of non-metropolitan schools. For the purposes of the present paper, the non-metropolitan schools will be referred to as rural schools, although in practice these consisted of a combination of semi-rural, rural, regional and remote schools.

Following this, participants were asked to indicate how much funding their school had received for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum (in \$), and what percentage of necessary funding this was on a scale from 0 - 200%. Instructions explained to participants that selecting a number above 100% would indicate they believed they had been allocated more than the funding necessary to implement the curriculum.

Following the funding questions, participants were asked to indicate the number of hours policymakers had spent in consultation with the school about the Australian Curriculum (in hours), what percentage of necessary consultation this was (on a scale from 0 - 200%) and the percentage of staff required for a successful implementation process that the school currently had available to them (0%-200%).

The fourth section asked participants to indicate whether they believed there was an adequate amount of time to consult with parents and community, develop and employ staff, produce relevant materials and understand the curriculum (on a series of 7 point scales: 1, *strongly disagree* - 7, *strongly agree*).

A final section asked participants how beneficial the Australian Curriculum would be to teachers, students, parents, schools, local community and Australia (on a series of 7 point scales: 1, *strongly disagree* - 7, *strongly agree*); Whether the delay in implementation had been accompanied by additional consultation, professional development, financial assistance, or staffing support (on a series of 7 point scales: 1, *strongly disagree* - 7, *strongly agree*); and how satisfied with the implementation process they were (0% - 100% satisfied).

Participants

Forty-three school leaders volunteered to participate in the study. Of these, 22 were metropolitan school leaders and 21 were rural school leaders. The majority of these ($n = 33$) were school principals, the remaining 12 were deputy principals or section heads. Fifteen of the metropolitan schools had more than 200 students, while only 5 had less than, or equal to, 200 students (meeting the classification for small schools; Anderson, 2010, Halsey, 2011). Eleven of the rural schools had more than 200 students, while 10 had less than, or equal to, 200 student enrolments.

Results

The data were analysed using t-tests and Analyses of Variance (ANOVA). Alpha levels of .05 were selected to determine significance. Cohen's d 's were calculated as measures of effect size. Typically, 0.2 represents small effects, 0.5 moderate effects, and 0.8 large effects (Cohen, 1988).

Finances

There was a significant difference in the amount of money that metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools had received for the purposes of implementing the Australian Curriculum, $t(39) = 2.041$, $p = .048$, $d = 0.63$. Metropolitan schools received more money for implementation ($M = \$3308.40$, $SD = \$5290.44$) than non-metropolitan schools ($M = \$809.52$, $SD = \$1833.55$).

It might be argued that these differences in funding could be due to school size, with rural schools often being smaller than metropolitan ones, and therefore correctly receiving less funding. To investigate this, I examined the amount of funding schools received per student using a 2 (School size: Greater than 200 students; Less than 200 students) by 2 (School location: Metropolitan; Non-metropolitan) factorial ANOVA. The results are displayed in Figure 1. As can clearly be seen there was a significant interaction between school size and school location, $F(1, 37) = 13.68$, $p = .001$. Specifically, metropolitan small schools received more funding per student ($M = \$43.26$, $SD = \$40.81$) than non-metropolitan small schools ($M = \$4.27$, $SD = \$9.98$), $t(14) = 3.091$, $p = .008$, $d = 1.67$. Schools with more than 200 pupils received similar funding per student whether they were metropolitan ($M = \$3.80$, $SD = \$7.00$) or non-metropolitan ($M = \3.12, $SD = \$6.02$), $t < 0.3$, $p = .802$. It should be noted that there were relatively few metropolitan small schools ($n = 5$), which means that outlying schools had a large impact on the means for this group, perhaps explaining the high average funding per student in this group.

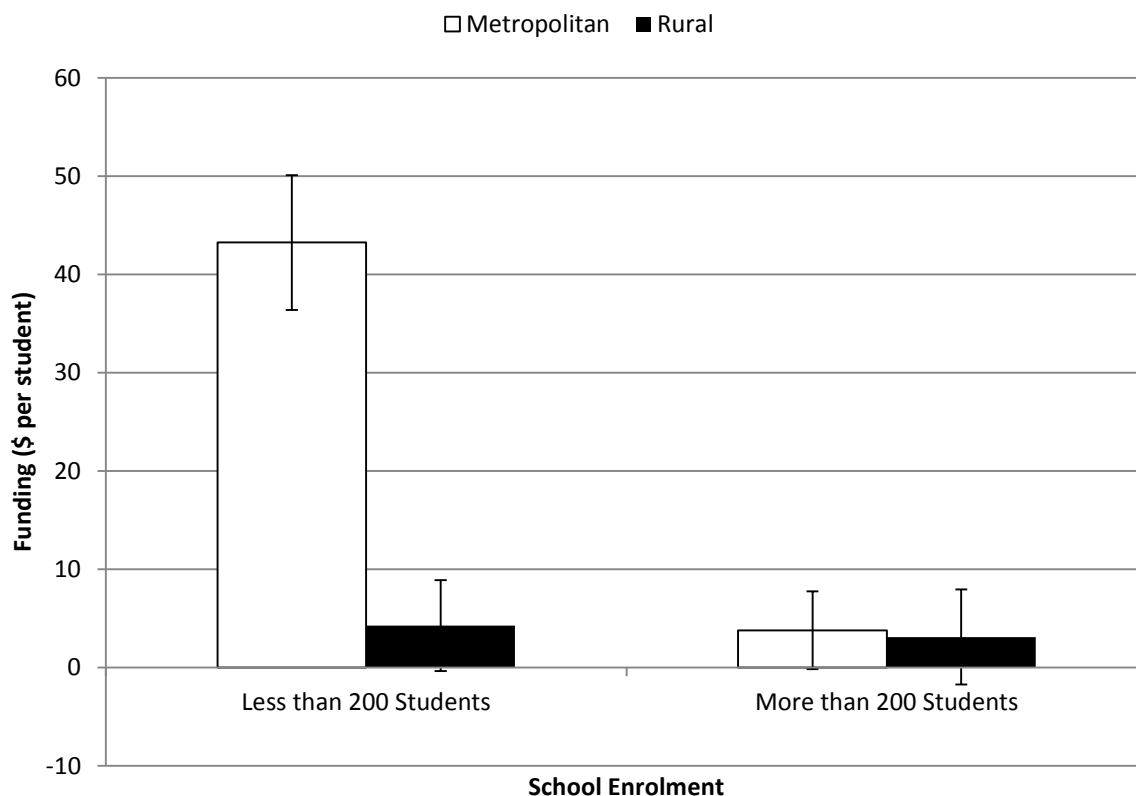


Figure 1. Average funding received per student in metropolitan and rural schools with pupils less than or equal to 200 pupils, and enrolments of greater than 200 students. Error bars denote standard errors.

To calculate the estimated funding required to implement the Australian Curriculum effectively, the amount of funding each school had received per student was divided by the percentage of funding the school estimated they had received of what was necessary for a successful implementation process. The average estimated required amounts were markedly similar between rural ($M = \$37.92$, $SD = \$88.88$) and metropolitan schools ($M = \$38.90$, $SD = \$50.76$), $t < 0.1$, $p = .971$. Thus, both school types estimated around \$40 per student would be required to implement the Australian Curriculum effectively.

When asked whether the delay to the implementation process had been accompanied by additional funding, rural schools were marginally more in agreement with the statement that additional funding had been forthcoming following the implementation delay ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.37$) than were metropolitan schools ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 0.75$), $t(37) = 1.70$, $p = .097$, $d = 0.55$. Note however, that both groups, on average, were either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement.

Staffing Requirements

There were no significant differences between rural ($M = 47.38\%$, $SD = 34.91\%$) and metropolitan schools ($M = 62.17\%$, $SD = 45.40\%$) in participants' estimates of the percentage of staff required for a successful implementation process that the school currently had available to them, $t < 1.3$, $p = .236$. Note that while there were no differences between school types, both metropolitan and rural schools estimated that they currently had around one half to two thirds of the staff required to support a successful implementation. There were no significant differences between rural ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 1.15$) and metropolitan schools ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.04$) on whether the delay in implementation had been accompanied by additional staffing support, $t < .3$, $p = .806$. Note that the means indicate both rural and metropolitan were in relatively strong disagreement that additional staffing had been forthcoming following the delay.

Amount of Consultation

School leaders reported no significant differences in the number of hours that policymakers had spent with metropolitan ($M = 37.10$ hours, $SD = 80.46$ hours) and rural schools ($M = 47.47$ hours, $SD = 166.92$ hours), $t < 0.3$, $p = .773$. There were also no significant differences between the estimated required amount of consultation time with policymakers that rural ($M = 103.67$ hours, $SD = 291.43$ hours) and metropolitan school leaders ($M = 97.22$ hours, $SD = 176.54$ hours) reported they believed necessary to support adequate implementation, $t < 0.1$, $p = .929$. The large variance may represent strong individual differences between schools as to the amount of consultation required to implement the curriculum. There were no significant differences between rural ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.54$) and metropolitan schools ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.76$) on whether they believed the delay in implementation had been accompanied by additional consultation, $t < 0.1$, $p = .924$. Finally, little additional professional development had been made available to rural ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.42$) and metropolitan schools ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.76$), and these did not significantly differ, $t < 0.3$, $p = .768$.

Amount of Time

Participants' agreement with the statements that they had enough time to consult with parents and community, develop and employ staff, produce relevant materials and understand the curriculum on a series of seven point scales were averaged to result in an adequate time scale. There were no significant differences between metropolitan ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.58$) and rural schools ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .99$) in whether they believed they had adequate time to implement the Australian Curriculum, $t < 0.3$, $p = .787$. Note that, on average, scores were quite low for both groups, indicating school leaders did not feel they had adequate time to implement the curriculum, even after the curriculum implementation had been delayed.

Benefits and Satisfaction

When asked to rate how beneficial the Australian Curriculum was to teachers, students, parents, schools, local community and Australia on seven points scales, rural school leaders showed a non-significant trend to believe that the curriculum was more beneficial for these groups on average ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 1.4$) than metropolitan school leaders ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(41) = 1.53$, $p = .135$. When asked to rate their satisfaction with the implementation process from 0-100% however, rural school leaders indicated significantly less satisfaction ($M = 31.19\%$, $SD = 18.23\%$) than metropolitan school leaders ($M = 45.00\%$, $SD = 24.59\%$), $t(41) = 2.08$, $p = .043$, $d = 0.64$.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to investigate how adequately resourced educational leaders currently perceive their schools to be for the purpose of implementing the Australian Curriculum and to investigate potential differences in resource availability between rural and metropolitan schools. In exploring these questions, some interesting results have come to light. Generally, rural school leaders appear to show more belief in the benefits of the Australian Curriculum than their urban counterparts. The delay in implementation appears to have resulted in marginally more funding for rural schools. Nonetheless, rural schools appear to still be inadequately resourced to implement the Australian Curriculum. However, this appears to not be limited to the rural environment, with metropolitan schools reporting similar resourcing problems. In other words, the Australian Curriculum appears to be resourced equitably, if inadequately. The exception in the present data is for small metropolitan schools, which appear to be resourced at a much higher level than other school types. These figures should be interpreted with caution however, since there were very few metropolitan small schools in the present sample.

There was a marginal tendency for rural schools to disagree less with the statement that additional funding had been forthcoming with the delay in the implementation process. However, both metropolitan and rural schools were, on average, disagreeing with the statement. This may indicate that some additional funds have come to rural schools following the delay but that this was only for a small subset of the schools surveyed, or only a small amount of funds. The dollar-value data presented in the present paper supports these interpretations, considering how little rural schools have received on average per student.

It appears that the implementation delay has not been met with additional funding, consultation, professional development or staffing. This, it might be argued, is a misstep in the implementation process. The delay could have been used to remedy the low levels of financial and systemic support schools have received to implement the Australian Curriculum thus ensuring successful implementation. Unless steps have been taken to rectify these issues since the data herein have been collected, it

appears that the implementation delay has been accompanied by little tangible change in the support offered to schools from policymakers.

The present studies support the notion that, according to educational leaders, rural schools are inadequately resourced to implement the Australian curriculum, but it does not support the notion this inadequacy is specific to rural communities. The data show that with the exception of a few metropolitan small schools, metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools have received similar funds per student, and that these funds are low (about \$3 - \$4 per student). This is about a tenth of what rural and urban school leaders concur to be the required amount of funding per student for a successful implementation process. Similar data are observed for the amount of consultation that rural and metropolitan schools have received for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. Both rural and metropolitan schools appear to have received similar consultation, but this is considerably less than what leaders from both school types consider to be necessary in order to successfully implement the curriculum, and appear to disagree equally with the notion that they have enough time to implement the curriculum successfully.

The amount of staff available to both rural and metropolitan schools was estimated to be around one half to two thirds of what would be required to successfully implement the Australian Curriculum. This concurs with the general lack of consultation and resources that school leaders indicated they had received for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

Rural school leaders displayed a marginal tendency to believe more that the Australian Curriculum would be beneficial for a variety of groups. Perhaps paradoxically, these same leaders were significantly less satisfied with the implementation process. Rural school leaders appear to be more supportive of the Australian Curriculum than the initial data indicated, and perhaps this support might even be increased if they were given greater resources for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, and were therefore more satisfied with the implementation process. Despite the potential for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum to marginalise rural schools, it appears to have some support in rural communities, at least among school leaders.

ACARA's commitment to excellence and equity implies two components be met. First, schools need to be funded to the same level (Equity) and adequately (Excellence). While the first is currently being achieved, more support is required to ensure that the Australian Curriculum results in excellence in schools. Much more needs to be done to support the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in rural schools. However, this does not imply that no more work is required for the implementation to be successful in metropolitan schools. Indeed, the comparative data presented in the current paper indicate that both rural and metropolitan schools are similarly under-resourced, under-consulted, and pressed for time.

Footnotes

¹For the purposes of the present paper, rural is used as a catchall term for any school which is not metropolitan. More accurately, the term is used to capture semi-rural, rural, regional and remote school contexts.

Acknowledgements

The research was funded by the Sidney Myer Foundation, The Myer Fund, and the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities. I am indebted to R. J. Halsey and M. van Breda for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

REFERENCES

- ACARA (2012a). Information Sheet: Diversity of Learners. Retrieved 21st June, 2012 from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Static/docs/Information%20Sheet%20Diversity%20of%20learners.pdf>
- ACARA (2012b). Information Sheet: A curriculum for all young Australians. Retrieved 21st June, 2012 from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Static/docs/Information%20Sheet%20A%20curriculum%20for%20all%20young%20Australians.pdf>
- Anderson, M. (2010) Size matters. In R. Redman (Ed.) *A Collective Act: Leading a Small School* (pp. 3-10). Victoria, Australia: ACER Press.
- Barbour, M. K. (2011) The promise and the reality: exploring virtual schooling in rural jurisdictions. *Education in Rural Australia*, 21, 1-20.
- Cohen J, 1988, *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbaum.
- Curtis, D. D. (2011) Tertiary education provision in rural Australia: Is VET a substitute for, or a pathway into, Higher Education? *Education in Rural Australia*, 21, 19-36.
- Drummond A, Halsey RJ, & van Breda M, (2011), The perceived importance of university presence in rural Australia. *Education in Rural Australia*, 21, 1-18.
- Drummond, A., Halsey, R. J. & van Breda, M. (2012). Implementing the Australian Curriculum in Rural Schools. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 32, 34-44.
- Galton, M. Hargreaves, L., & Comber, C. (1998). Classroom practice and the National Curriculum in small rural primary schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 24, 43-61.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003) The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place. *Educational Researcher*, 4, 3-12.
- Halsey, R.J. (2009) "Teaching in the country would not be so bad": How much does it cost to find out? *ISFIRE 2009 Symposium Proceedings*, 137-145
- Halsey, R.J. (2011) Small Schools, Big Future. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55, 5-13.
- Hannan, B. (1987) An Australian Curriculum, *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 29, 7-15.
- Hargreaves, L., Comber, C., & Galton, M. (1996). The National Curriculum: can small schools deliver? Confidence and competence levels of teachers in small rural schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 22, 89-99.
- Lock, G., Reid, J. & White, S. (2011). Investing in sustainable and resilient rural social space: lessons for teacher education. *Education in Rural Australia*, 21, 67-78.
- McInerney, P. Smyth, J. & Down, B. (2011) Coming to a *place* near you?' The politics and possibilities of a critical pedagogy of place-based education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 39, 3-16

Vulliamy, G., & Webb, R. (1995). The implementation of the National Curriculum in small primary schools, *Educational Review*, 47, 25-41.