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The Perennials and Trends of Rural Education: Discourses that Shape Research and Practice

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Abstract

For over 30 years, the Journal of the Society for Provision of Education in Rural Australia has reported research and practice discourses associated with rural, regional and remote education, with the aim of impacting policy and practices relating to education in rural Australia. The journal, originally named *Education in Rural Australia*, commenced in 1991 and, with an increasingly international focus, changed to the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* in 2012.

This article critically synthesises the content of the Journal, which includes 500 unique contributions. The articles were placed into an NVivo project and coded using themes derived from word frequency counts. The critical analysis identifies nine perennial themes that appear regularly throughout the 33 volumes: aspiration, success and achievement; community and relationships at the centre of rural education; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; deficit discourses; equity, rights and justice; parents and family; resourcing and funding; rurality and place, and teacher preparation. In addition, the analysis identifies trending issues, which wax and wane over the Journal's life.

This article highlights the Journal's important and sustained contribution to research evidence for rural education. From the perennial and trending issues, it is possible to see the interconnections and influences between themes, but also the absence of discourses in certain areas that calls for future research. The analysis has policy implications for education stakeholders, particularly given that some of the concerns raised by the articles in the Journal remain largely unanswered more than 30 years on. This article calls for change and challenges policy makers to address issues that we already know exist and have provided possible solutions.

Introduction

For over 30 years, the journal of the Society for Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) has reported research and practice discourses associated with rural, regional, and remote education. The Journal, originally named *Education in Rural Australia* (ERA), commenced in 1991, and, with an increasingly international focus, changed to the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (AIJRE) in 2012. Since 2018, international editors have been included on the editorial team and an International Editorial Advisory Board was established in 2022. By 2023, the AIJRE had published 500 articles, including research papers, practice articles (described as Rural Connections papers), reports, editorials, and book reviews.

This article presents critical findings of a deep dig into the Journal's archive, examining the perennials of rural education research, the trends, and the gaps. These findings have enormous value, as they potentially inform emerging policy and good practice, and set an agenda for new research in rural education. The article begins with an exploration of the key themes identified from the archive. A methodology for the analysis is presented, followed by a presentation of findings in terms of thematic intersections and key trends that have shaped the field. Finally, the article reinforces the need to address the perennial themes and presents issues that are yet to be fully explored by the Journal. The discussion turns to the implications for research, policy, and practice.

Beyond the Journal

The analysis presented in this article should be read alongside existing literature that explores rural education research themes and trends over time. Biddle and Azano (2016), for example, offer an analysis of 100 years of rural education research in the United States. Stelmach (2011) offers a thematic summary of international rural issues. More recently the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* (Azano et al., 2021) takes a thematic approach to a range of issues affecting rural education in that country, while offering international perspectives on these issues. Roberts and Fuqua (2021), in their book *Ruraling Education Research*, take a similar approach, but with more focus on Australian authors. Other reviews focus on specific issues such as rural teacher education (e.g., Reagan et al., 2019) or pedagogy (Petrone & Olsen, 2021). Embedded within these perspectives is an understanding that *rural* is difficult to define and is not a simple binary alternative to *metropolitan* (Roberts et al., 2022). Many of the issues raised by these international analyses of rural education overlap with the issues that are uncovered in this article. A thorough analysis of the crossover and shared interests is perhaps warranted, but will not be reviewed here, as the focus is to draw attention to the body of work presented in the AIJRE and ERA.

Journal Background

SPERA was formed in 1985. According to Dale et al. (2009), "in 1991 SPERA launched its journal, *Education in Rural Australia*, as a means of promoting rural education nationally" (p. 8). It also advocates for, and responds to, policies that intersect with rural education issues (Boylan, 2012), and many of the Journal's articles respond to policy issues or present policy perspectives (Nash, 2022). The 1990s saw 97 articles published, a mix of practice and research articles along with

reports and opinion pieces. While it was called *Education in Rural Australia*, six of the articles came from international authors. In the 2000s, 120 articles were published, with a greater focus on research. Ten articles were from international authors. A total of 209 articles were published in the 2010s, with 28 international contributions, reflecting the change of name to the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* in 2012. At the time of writing in the 2020s, 74 new articles had been published, with 20 from international authors. The 500th article was published in 2023. While most articles published continue to be based on research projects, each issue typically includes at least one Rural Connections practice article, a book review and an editorial.

Literature from the Journal

The literature under examination here is that produced by ERA and the AIJRE from 1991 to 2023. We present a summary of the key themes that have been written about since the journal's inception. The issues covered could be described as “the perennials” of rural education—issues that appear regularly throughout the Journal's history. The themes were identified using key word and phrase searches, as outlined in the Methodology section.

Community and Relationships at the Centre of Rural Education

The social context of community relationships is a central and recurring theme across all volumes of the Journal. The concept of community is variously described. The community is seen as somewhat separate to the school—for example new staff appreciate being welcomed “into the community” (Vance & Sullivan, 1993, p. 28). Conversely, staff engage with community to “influence the community beyond the school” (Bowie, 1995, p. 36). Others saw that a disconnect between school and community is caused by a lack of the required social capital (Allard & Sanderson, 2003).

The concept of rural social space, advanced by White et al. (2011), connects with community: “It is the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time” (p.71). It has implications for new teaching staff who “should understand the notion of rural social space ... [who] need to develop the social capital ... to enable them to be an effective educator, and community member in a rural setting” (Lock et al., 2009, p. 40). Alongside the idea of space is place (Green et al., 2013), which Christie (2006) connects with identity. Like Christie, Van Gelderen highlights the importance of community as Country and as home in remote Aboriginal contexts (Van Gelderen, 2017; Van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019).

Community is also intrinsically linked to rural sustainability (Downes & Fuqua, 2018; White et al., 2011). Halsey (2009a) makes a strong claim for the important role of education at the nexus between community and sustainable rural community futures. Regardless of the theoretical conception of community, it is clear from the Journal's literature that community is central to the delivery of education in rural contexts (Ledger, 2020; Yarrow et al., 1999). Community connects with the concepts of rurality and place, too.

Rurality and Place

Brennan (2005) argued for a theoretical understanding for “re-inscribing rurality” in educational research, suggesting that “rurality ... has been largely missing from the pages of educational research texts” (p. 11). Roberts and Cuervo (2015), 10 years later in an editorial article, reiterated the lament. However, questions about rurality as a construct outside of rural disadvantage have been raised by other authors going back to the early years of the Journal (Cameron-Jackson, 1995; d’Plesse, 1992; Fullarton et al., 2004). Similarly, the discourses of regionality are also explored by authors in ways that challenge the deficit discourses of rural, regional and remote contexts (Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2015; Harreveld, 2004).

Deficit Discourses

To highlight the framing of rural and remote as an inherent disadvantage, we could turn to Griffith's (2003) attempt to measure rural and remote disadvantage, which sees population size, distance, and economic measures as keys to quantifying the deficit. However, in many articles throughout the Journal's history, rural disadvantage is clearly assumed as normative (Croft-Piggin, 2014; Mason & Randell, 1992; McLean et al., 2014; Squires, 2003). Reid (2017) refers to "*persistent and entrenched locational disadvantage*" (p. 88). Deficit messaging from the OECD was called out by Ledger and Fuqua (2021) just a few years later. Deficits are not only described as disadvantage, but in terms of problems such as staffing (Downes & Roberts, 2018), barriers to be overcome (Martin & Broadley, 2018), complexities due to a "*tyranny of distance*" (Rossiter et al., 2018, p. 72) and general concerns (Baker & Andrews, 1991). In one reflective article, rural is described as a declining "*dust belt*" (McConaghy, 2006, p. 39). The entrenched nature of problematising the rural leads to a perpetuation of deficit discourses, for example as "*gaps*" and "*challenges*" (McConaghy et al., 2006, p. 13), or as difficulties and "*wicked problems*" (Reid, 2017, p. 88), or even "*chasms*" (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007, p. 3).

Aspiration, Success and Achievement

There is a counter-discourse which taps into the strength of the rural with narratives of success reflected in many articles (Freeman, 1993; Hemmings et al., 1998), as well as how to improve the likelihood of success for rural students (Sawyer & Medlin, 2002). Even where problems or barriers are identified in research, research questions are sometimes posed to reflect the positive experiences of learning in rural and remote communities (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Hardwick-Franco, 2018).

Against educational research and policy discourses that point out to an apparent lack of aspirations by rural and remote students, families and schools, evidence from the Journal suggests that aspirations of rural and remote students differ little from their urban counterparts (Ellis, 2006; Vernon et al., 2018). While much of the Journal's literature is focused on determining factors that promote aspiration (Drummond et al., 2012; Hemmings & Boylan, 1992; Smith et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2022), there is also evidence to show that aspirations are grounded in or determined by place (Bangarr, 2022; Smith et al., 2017), and that those aspirations are no better or worse than aspirations of non-rural/remote students.

There is also a strong discourse of resilience, persistence and achievement running through the articles of the Journal. The narratives behind these discourses speak to the strengths of rural and remote students and educators, often in the face of significant challenges (Bangarr, 2022; Holden, 2005).

Resourcing and Funding

Resourcing and funding for schools, teachers, pre-service teachers and university students more generally is a theme that spans all the decades of the Journal. The issues are systemic as noted by Downes and Roberts (2018) and are linked to equity and access (Downes & Fuqua, 2018). This means that the impacts are often felt by individuals. For example, Devlin and McKay (2018) highlighted financial hardships for low SES students studying in rural locations, and this is perhaps more pronounced in rural areas outside Australia (Lin, 2018) where mobilisation of local resources was considered important (Anlimachie et al., 2022). These were associated with higher cost of living, travel and accommodation. Elsewhere, limited access to and availability of educational resources for teachers in rural areas is lamented (Yang, 2018), and this is directly linked to remoteness or rural isolation (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). Low levels of financial literacy are also noted as problems for rural students more often than for urban learners (Ali et al., 2016).

These issues are not new. As Scott (1991) noted in his article, in the first volume of ERA about issues for education in remote rural Australia, "*resources in the end whether they are human or*

equipment come back to money: to train, to purchase equipment and so on” (p. 11). Funding formulas and resourcing that take account of the needs of small schools have been raised as particular issues of concern (Drummond, 2012; Stevens, 1993).

Teacher Preparation

Preparing teachers for rural and remote contexts is another strong and recurring theme running throughout the Journal. Many of the articles explore specific interventions designed to support and attract pre-service teachers to rural and remote communities. These include the Country Areas Program in New South Wales (Hemmings & Boylan, 1992), the Priority Country Area Program in Queensland (Yarrow et al., 1998), university-based internship and mentoring programs (Drummond et al., 2012; Yarrow et al., 1999), community immersion programs and taster field trips (Lavery et al., 2018; Sharplin, 2010), and beginning teacher support programs (Baills et al., 2002). Practicum experience and internship programs are also discussed (King, 1994), sometimes from the perspective of pre-service teachers (Davidson, 2011; Penfold, 2000).

There has also been a focus on preparation of non-Indigenous teachers for remote Indigenous contexts (Wallin & Scribe, 2022). More recently, the importance of nurturing local teachers from remote Indigenous communities has been highlighted (Bangarr, 2022; Van Gelderen, 2017). However, given the ongoing focus on preparing students for rural, regional and remote contexts, little policy or accreditation changes have occurred.

Parents and Families

Research presented in the Journal often seeks to gain views of parents, providing advice about perceptions, positions, and evidence for children’s experiences of rural education (du Plessis & Bailey, 2000; Exley, 2007; Kilpatrick et al., 2020). This is an important aspect of the Journal, as it aims to connect research with practice that can have a real impact in rural communities.

The role that parents and families play in rural and remote community education is a strong recurring theme across the volumes of the Journal. Parents are recognised as making choices for their children’s education (McSwan & Stevens, 1995), or not being able to make choices (Yang, 2022). The question of choice sometimes means that families or children have to leave their community to pursue a quality education or parents send their children to boarding schools (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Su et al., 2018). Young people pursuing tertiary education options are faced with these same difficult choices: Do I leave home, or do I stay? (Halsey, 2009b).

The importance of engaging parents in rural schooling processes is also recognised as an important issue (Downer, 1996; Ratcliffe & Boughton, 2019), to ensure strong relationships between the school and family for the benefit of the young person (Lester, 2011). The mechanisms for parent involvement reported in the Journal vary, from involvement of parents in school councils (Boylan & Davis, 1999) to targeted engagement programs (Kilpatrick et al., 2020).

Parent involvement is not always reported as a positive for parents, and some articles suggest that engagement is simply an additional instrument for control and assimilation, particularly for Aboriginal students and their families (Allard & Sanderson, 2003) where historical trauma creates resistance to engagement (Duncan et al., 2022) and fails to have the desired impacts of improved student engagement in learning and better outcomes (Stone et al., 2017). From a teacher’s perspective, parent involvement is sometimes seen as a “*complex practice*” (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 31) or difficult work. These critical perspectives on parent involvement offer a counter to assumptions that suggest benefits to children will necessarily follow from strategies to improve parent involvement.

Equity, Rights and Justice

The first article of the first issue, by Morrow (1991), was titled *What does social justice mean for education in rural Australia?* Morrow's view of social justice was limited to issues of redressing perceived disadvantage in terms of technology access, retention rates, and access to further and higher education. The need for equitable access to education has continued as a recurring theme throughout the Journal's history, with arguments presented for better access to education generally (Downes & Fuqua, 2018), distance education and early learning programs (Kirk, 1994), and gifted learning support (Bailey et al., 1995). More recently, attention has turned to online learning (Stone et al., 2019), particularly in the COVID/post-COVID environment (Birnie, 2022).

Much of the discourse related to equity has presented the case for rural students to be considered an equity group (Arnold, 2001). Ironically, some researchers use disadvantage as the basis for justifying an equity agenda (Reid et al., 2005)—that is, the assumed cause of a problem to be fixed is the inherent disadvantage of rurality or remoteness. Social justice, in this sense, can present rural students and schools as disadvantaged and through a deficit lens, thus ignoring the strengths of rural education that contributors to this Journal have highlighted over three decades.

Racism associated with rural education systems was first raised as an issue of specific concern in 2001 (Dunn, 2001). Dunn's article described institutional and individual racism, raised problems with government policies, and made the comment that "*the history of racism and education in relation to Indigenous people in Australia is one which was, in earlier times, largely enacted in rural areas*" (p. 64). McLaren's (2005) self-reflexive article sheds light on emerging ideas of white complicity in racism. She reflects on a professional development: "*The aim of this day titled, 'A Deadly Day', is to upset the dominant deficit and disadvantaged discourses that are commonly used by educators to explain the Aboriginal student's experience at school*" (p. 43). While Gorringer's (2011) keynote address, published in ERA, touches on these issues from an Indigenous standpoint, it was not until 2019, though, that racism was raised in a research article by Aboriginal academic Hogarth (2019), who wrote about her own experience of racism in rural schools. Recently, the focus of attention has shifted somewhat towards the decolonisation of teaching, curriculum and schooling in Indigenous contexts (Duncan et al., 2022; Hlalele, 2019; Wallin & Scribe, 2022; Wallin & Tunison, 2022).

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

The relevance of curriculum to rural and remote school contexts has been raised often by authors over the years (Fullarton et al., 2004), with recommendations for adaptations to make curriculum work for local rural contexts (Martin & Broadley, 2018) and the incorporation of local cultures and languages (Yang, 2018). This is in part, according to some researchers, because curriculum is developed in "*urban (metropolitan) centres*" (McSwan & Stevens, 1995, p. 48). Of some concern is the limited availability of curriculum options that are normally available to students in metropolitan schools (Staunton, 1995).

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the need to "*de-marginalise Indigenous issues in the curriculum*" (Taylor, 2005, p. 63) is raised from non-Indigenous and Aboriginal positionalities, both in Australia and in other countries such as South Africa (Hlalele, 2019). Lowe et al. (2019), for example, suggest that there are "*inherent dissonances between Aboriginal people and the mandated curriculum*" (p. 22).

That dissonance extends to pedagogies as well, where dominant culture teachers who come into rural and remote spaces are unaware of the local "*cultural practices of pedagogy*" (Clancy & Simpson, 2001, p. 2). In some cases, there is resistance to change in teaching practices (Wallin & Tunison, 2022). More generally, Roberts (2013) discusses the need to re-engage an awareness of place in both pedagogy and curriculum.

The literature on assessment practices and strategies in rural schools is somewhat muted, although critiques of Australia's NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) are reasonably common (Belcastro & Boon, 2012; Guenther et al., 2014), as are critiques of national standardised testing regimes more generally, which run counter to the argument for place-based learning (e.g., Bryden, 2004).

Methodology

Three questions driving the analysis presented are:

1. What are the recurring (perennial) issues of concern to rural education that emerge from the Journal?
2. What trends are evident over the life of the Journal? (How have issues changed?)
3. Are there any areas of study or research overlooked within the Journal?

The methodology applied to this research draws on a relatively uncritical form of content analysis (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018), with the intent of producing an analytical coding structure built on an analysis of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) that allows for a more critical interrogation of discourses within the data.

The process for the analysis was to import the content of 33 volumes (up to Issue 1 of 2023) of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (including the initial 21 volumes which were published under *Education in Rural Australia*) into a NVivo database. Attributes were applied to each file, like an annotated bibliography (North, 2011), including the year and decade of publication, the lead institution represented by the first author, whether it was created by an Australian or international author, and what type of article it was (journal, practice article, report or editorial).

In the first phase of analysis, a stemmed-word frequency table was generated within NVivo. This assisted with the identification of frequently used words related to concepts associated with the subject matter of the research. To confirm that content was correctly attributed to themes, a more detailed reading of a sample of articles was carried out. This ensured that more nuanced expressions of some themes were captured correctly.

Two levels of coding were developed: parent and child codes as shown in Table 1.

. In each case, stemmed words were used in text search criteria. Some words were excluded from searches. For example, “teacher,” “rural,” “student,” “school,” “education,” and “university” were not used on their own. Most of these words are contextual words and could be expected to appear in almost every article.

This first phase of analysis informed the literature review. Even though the literature emerged from the methodology, the literature has not been considered as findings.

Table 1. Parent and Child Codes

Parent codes	Child code 1	Child code 2	Child code 3	Other child codes
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	Aboriginal	First Nations	Indigenous	
Aspiration, success, and achievement*	Achievement	Aspiration	Success	Excellence
Attendance and truancy	Absenteeism	Attendance	Truancy	
Collaboration	Collaboration	Networks	Partnerships	
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education*	Community	Relationships	Socialisation	
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*	Assessment	Curriculum	NAPLAN	Pedagogy
Deficit discourses*	Barriers	Complexity	Concerns	Difficulties, Disadvantages, Discourses, Problems
Educational leadership	Leaders	Leadership	Principals	
Equity, rights and justice*	Disability	Diversity	Equality, Equity, exclusion	Inclusion, Justice, Racism, Discrimination, Rights, Migrants, Refugees
Gender and difference	Feminism	Gender	Masculinity	Queer, Sexuality, LGBT
Health	Clinical	COVID-19	Health, Hospitals	Medical, Mental health
Information and communication technology	Internet	Online learning	Technology	
Literacy and numeracy	Language, Bilingual	Literacy	Numeracy	Adult literacy
Parents and family*	Family	Fathers, Mothers	Parents	
Policy and politics	Policy	Politics		
Resourcing and funding*	Finance	Funding	Resourcing	
Rurality and place*	Country	Distance education	Isolation	Regionality, Remote, Rurality
Teacher preparation*	Internships	Placements	Practicum	Preparation, Preservice
Theory and philosophy	Theory	Epistemology	Axiology, ethics	Ontology
Transitions and pathways	Career planning	Pathways	Transitions	
Workforce	Attraction	Recruitment	Retention	Salaries, Incentives

Note: An asterisk (*) denotes perennial themes.

Once the coding framework was established, a second phase of analysis was conducted. A series of crosstab tables was prepared to examine the presence of coding references (defined as paragraphs containing key words). The first crosstab was a parent code by parent code matrix so that points of intersection across codes could be identified. The second was a crosstab of parent codes by decade. A third crosstab examined codes by international/Australian authorship.

Also as part of the analysis, sectors and models were identified. These refer to the educational sectors (primary, secondary, tertiary) and models (such as alternative, distance, boarding schools) that articles are based on. They are contextual attributes of articles, rather than issues that are raised.

Limitations

The analysis presented here could be seen as preliminary in nature, in that it relies primarily on stemmed word searches. At times, this can give false positive results; for example, where a word is used incidentally in an article and may have nothing to do with the research or topic presented in the document. Further, some words may have multiple meanings; for example, under the parent code of deficit discourses, a child code related to “concerns” is shown. This might reflect “concerns held” about an issue or problem, but at times it may include “concerns” as an expression of inclusive descriptors; for example, “education philosophy is concerned with epistemology and ontology.” To avoid unnecessary inflation of coding numbers, at times word stemming was not used; for example, rather than using “concerns,” “concerns about” was used as the search term.

Also, because the unit of analysis here is the “file,” rather than a paragraph within a file, the overlaps tend to be inflated. For example, one code might appear in the introduction to an article and another code could be found in the conclusion.

The analysis perhaps raises more questions than it answers, but this opens opportunities for future, more detailed analyses. As discussed later in the article, the gaps in the data also create opportunities for future interrogations of the data, and potentially, for a comparative study, drawing from a broader body of international rural education research. In this article, there is not sufficient space for an interpretive and critical consideration of the data. It does, however, leave room for subsequent analysis to explore the issues raised (and those that are missing) with a more critical lens.

Findings

Table 2 summarises findings from the analysis of intersecting key themes identified through the analysis process. The numbers represent the count of documents that include references to the NVivo stemmed word frequency search for each of the parent codes. The numbers in bold reflect the total number of files coded to an individual parent code.

The other numbers represent the number of files coded to both the parent codes in the corresponding rows and columns. For example, references to “attendance and truancy” appear in 340 of the 500 files reviewed, but only 86 files have been coded as both “attendance and truancy” and “collaboration.” The grey highlighted cells indicate an association between two themes (column and row), such that at least half of the files with reference to one theme are included in files containing the other theme.

Table 2. Intersection of Key Themes, Based on the Number of Articles that Contain Descriptors of each Theme

	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	Aspiration, success and achievement	Attendance and truancy	Collaboration	Community and relationships	Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment	Deficit discourses	Educational leadership	Equity, rights and justice	Gender and difference	Health	Information and communication technology	Literacy and numeracy	Parents and family	Politics and policy	Resourcing and funding	Rurality and place	Teacher preparation	Theory	Transitions and pathways	Workforce	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	234																					
Aspiration, success and achievement*	98	463																				
Attendance and truancy	69	118	340																			
Collaboration	68	195	86	394																		
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education *	171	350	201	394	487																	
Curriculum pedagogy and assessment*	78	222	90	138	300	439																
Deficit discourses*	114	292	170	191	408	251	483															
Educational leadership	63	142	71	130	235	122	151	356														
Equity, rights and justice*	97	175	77	109	297	163	218	83	406													
Gender and difference	22	34	23	20	80	24	57	25	54	171												
Health and wellbeing	62	99	48	87	205	95	151	63	83	19	301											
Information and communication technology	43	121	73	127	214	139	164	62	91	8	78	366										
Literacy and numeracy	70	121	58	67	165	142	138	58	82	20	46	96	299									
Parents and family*	98	214	149	141	343	163	256	142	147	51	119	91	87	412								
Politics and policy	64	165	53	109	270	147	209	101	147	35	74	69	62	135	379							
Resourcing and funding*	79	227	107	188	327	183	255	135	149	26	109	137	78	185	162	448						
Rurality and place*	152	282	165	199	380	228	337	148	216	51	129	206	119	264	193	254	473					
Teacher preparation*	103	241	135	195	347	260	292	160	184	43	99	151	131	216	147	216	278	453				
Theory and philosophy	46	88	25	75	184	82	118	55	71	16	45	54	47	57	80	65	93	101	305			
Transitions and pathways	46	145	54	89	205	103	149	82	69	29	59	61	51	86	56	77	123	116	42	279		
Workforce	43	125	47	74	199	83	175	78	86	17	61	59	36	93	86	124	169	143	29	47	332	

Note: Themes marked with an asterisk (*) are described as “perennial” in the text. The shaded cells indicate strong thematic relationships, where at least half of the articles containing one theme are also found in documents with the intersecting theme.

The Perennial Issues

While the methodology for analysis is preliminary, the perennial issues—those that crop up year in and year out—are represented with high numbers in Table 2. Those that are represented in more than 80% of articles are:

- aspiration, success and achievement
- community and relationships at the centre of rural education
- curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- equity, rights and justice
- deficit discourses
- parents and family
- resourcing and funding
- rurality and place
- teacher preparation

Thematic Relationships

The relationships shown in Table 2 (shown in alphabetical order of parent codes) point to research and discourse associations, where one theme informs or underpins others, or where themes are mutually supportive. Strong thematic relationships are indicated by cell shading. These relationships are important because they frame the discourses associated with rural education. The data do not indicate the direction of the relationship, that is, one theme leading directly to another. Rather, we can be confident only that there is a relationship or association between the themes.

A summary of the strong thematic relationships, ranked by the number of connecting themes, is shown in Table 3. The table shows how the theme “community and relationships at the centre of rural education” connects strongly with every theme except “gender and difference.” Beyond this, the theme of “deficit discourses” connects with another 20 themes; “rurality and place” connects strongly with 10 themes; “teacher preparation” with three, and “parents and families” and “aspiration, success and achievement” with one each.

Trends over Time

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of articles, within a given decade, that include one of the 21 themes shown in Table 2. The perennials, as listed at the start of the Findings section, are highlighted in shades of green, and the shades of red indicate items that appear in fewer than 80% of the articles in each decade. Darker shading reflects the lower and higher extremes of thematic representation in the Journal’s articles (also the case for Table 5).

The table also highlights changes in content with progressive and sustained increases in themes related to “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education” including international Indigenous education, “attendance and truancy,” “collaboration,” “educational leadership,” “health and wellbeing,” “transitions and pathways,” and “workforce” issues. Interest in “theory and philosophy,” “gender and difference,” “literacy and numeracy,” “policy and politics,” “equity, rights and justice,” and “information and communication technology” peaked in the 2010s.

Table 3. Summary of Strong Thematic Relationships

Themes	Are associated with
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education	Attendance and truancy Educational leadership Health Information and communication technology Literacy and numeracy Theory and philosophy Transitions and pathways Workforce Aspiration, success, and achievement Collaboration Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Deficit discourses Equity, rights and justice Parents and family Politics and policy Resourcing and funding Rurality and place Teacher preparation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education
Deficit discourses	Attendance and truancy Workforce Aspiration, success, and achievement Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Parents and family Resourcing and funding Rurality and place Teacher preparation Aspiration, success, and achievement Parents and family Resourcing and funding
Rurality and place	Collaboration Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Equity, rights and justice Information and communication technology Politics and policy Aspiration, success and achievement Parents and family Resourcing and funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education
Teacher preparation	Aspiration, success and achievement Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Rurality and place
Parents and families	Teacher preparation
Aspiration, success, and achievement	Resourcing and funding

Table 4. Thematic Trends over Four Decades

Themes	Number of articles within decade				Percentage of articles within decade			
	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	27	56	103	48	28%	47%	49%	65%
Aspiration, success and achievement*	86	110	196	70	89%	92%	94%	95%
Attendance and truancy	54	82	151	53	56%	68%	72%	72%
Collaboration	51	101	176	65	53%	84%	84%	88%
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education *	92	115	204	74	95%	96%	98%	100%
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*	78	107	189	64	80%	89%	90%	86%
Deficit discourses*	91	113	205	73	94%	94%	98%	99%
Educational leadership	59	76	160	60	61%	63%	77%	81%
Equity, rights and justice*	61	97	179	62	63%	81%	86%	84%
Gender and difference	17	33	91	30	18%	28%	44%	41%
Health and wellbeing	33	71	136	60	34%	59%	65%	81%
Information and communication technology	56	86	169	55	58%	72%	81%	74%
Literacy and numeracy	37	75	143	43	38%	63%	68%	58%
Parents and family*	80	97	168	66	82%	81%	80%	89%
Policy and politics	54	85	179	60	56%	71%	86%	81%
Resourcing and funding*	82	107	188	70	85%	89%	90%	95%
Rurality and place*	92	111	194	72	95%	93%	93%	97%
Teacher preparation*	82	105	195	70	85%	88%	93%	95%
Theory and philosophy	20	62	165	57	21%	52%	79%	77%
Transitions and pathways	38	71	163	59	39%	59%	78%	80%
Workforce	48	75	154	55	49%	63%	74%	74%
Total articles	97	120	209	74	97	120	209	74

Note: Codes marked with an asterisk are perennial issues, that is, they appear consistently in 80% or more of articles in all decades.

Table 5 presents an analysis of articles that describe specific sectors and models of education (sorted alphabetically). Red shaded cells indicate that fewer than 20% of the articles in each decade discuss a particular sector or model, while the green gradients show sectors and models with greater representation. The strongest focus has been on secondary education. The higher education sector has increased in prominence. Boarding schools and middle years education have increasingly been represented. A special issue on boarding schools in Volume 30 affected the numbers in the 2020s. Distance education, area schools, special needs education and adult education have had a reducing focus over time. The representation of primary schools and vocational education has remained constant throughout the decades.

Table 5. Focus on Sectors and Educational Models by Decade

Sectors and models of education	Number of articles within decade				Percentage of articles within decade				Total articles
	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s	
Alternative education	4	5	7	4	4%	4%	3%	5%	20
Area schools or District High Schools	6	6	8	1	6%	5%	4%	1%	21
Boarding	16	12	29	24	16%	10%	14%	32%	81
Distance education	46	37	56	10	47%	31%	27%	14%	149
Small schools	21	17	23	13	22%	14%	11%	18%	74
Special needs	9	13	17	1	9%	11%	8%	1%	40
Adult education	18	30	40	5	19%	25%	19%	7%	93
Early years	24	39	78	23	25%	33%	37%	31%	164
Middle years	2	5	29	10	2%	4%	14%	14%	46
Primary schools	32	33	73	24	33%	28%	35%	32%	162
Secondary education	65	80	157	52	67%	67%	75%	70%	354
Universities (higher education)	29	53	136	44	30%	44%	65%	59%	262
Vocational education	18	29	55	19	19%	24%	26%	26%	121
Totals	97	120	209	74	97	120	209	74	500

Table 6 presents the analysis of articles by international/Australian lead authors for each decade. The data show the rise of internationally based articles in the 2010s and 2020s, following the change of direction with the renaming of the Journal in 2011. By the 2020s, more than a quarter of lead authors was based outside Australia. A comparison of article themes for international and Australian articles is shown in Appendix A. The themes diverge very little with only “health and wellbeing and “policy and politics” showing a difference, being more likely to appear in international articles. Part of the shift in emphasis to international articles has come from special issues (see Appendix B), which in the five years to 2022 have included three issues with a mainly international focus. A further special issue with an international focus was published in 2023 after the analysis for this article was conducted.

Table 6. International and Australian Lead Authors by Decade

Lead Authors	Number of articles within decade				Percentage of articles within decade			
	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
International	6	10	28	20	6%	8%	13%	27%
Australian	91	110	181	54	94%	92%	87%	73%
Total	97	120	209	74	100%	100%	100%	100%

Discussion

What are the Recurring (Perennial) Issues of Concern to Rural Education that Emerge from the Journal?

The recurring or perennial concerns of rural education that emerge from the Journal are contained in nine major themes, which have been briefly outlined and discussed in the literature review, based on articles from the 33 volumes of the Journal.

- aspiration, success and achievement
- community and relationships at the centre of rural education
- curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- deficit discourses
- equity, rights and justice
- parents and family
- resourcing and funding
- rurality and place
- teacher preparation

The theme of “community and relationships at the centre of rural education” intersects with all the perennials. This may suggest, as discussed earlier in the literature, that community is at the core of rural education and forms a foundation for strength as reflected in the theme of “aspiration, success and achievement” and the importance of “parent and family” involvement in rural schooling. But community is also connected to “deficit discourses” which, throughout the Journal’s history, have been articulated as a problem for researchers to resolve. The problems revolve specifically around “resourcing and funding,” and around “teacher preparation”—finding enough of the right kind of teacher to work in rural schools.

While these perennials are perhaps not surprising, what is surprising is that, despite the evidence of more than 30 years of rural educational research, those of us working in the field today are still discussing unsolved problems related to perceived deficits, community-centred education, justice and equity, and preparing teachers for rural contexts. We continue to point to funding shortfalls, high costs and rural disadvantage as barriers, and use these deficit discourses to argue for better policy, greater funding, and contextually relevant curriculum. Why are we not using discourses of strength and diversity, and the economic benefit that comes from rural and remote communities?

Perhaps, as Nash (2022) argued in her conference keynote that was published in the AIJRE in 2022, the answer lies in presenting solutions, rather than simply focusing on the challenges.

What Trends are Evident over the Life of the Journal? (How have Issues Changed?)

Several trends can be noted following the analysis presented in the findings. These trends are in part a product of the direction provided by the editorial teams that have led the Journal. But they are also a reflection of changing rural and policy contexts and developments.

The shift towards internationalising the Journal (see Table 6) is one example of the direct impact of editorial leadership. So too is the increased focus on Indigenous education and boarding (Table 5), which towards the end of the 2010s and the early 2020s rose from the networks associated with members of the then editorial team and resulted in two special issues (see Appendix A). The greater focus on theory and philosophy has also been driven by the more academic focus of the editorial team that emerged in the 2010s. The impact of editorial teams shaping fields of study within journals is highlighted in higher education journals (see Whitsed et al., 2021); the shaping of rural education discourse in the AIJRE is strongly linked to the editorial team composition (which has had international representation since 2018).

Other shifts in emphasis, such as a decline in articles about adult education, have come about because of the decline in the adult and community education sector. Conversely, the rise of articles related to higher education reflects in part a policy focus on addressing equity in higher education, the Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al., 2012), and the establishment of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in Australia at Curtin University.

Other trends, such as the declining focus on special needs, possibly arises from the lack of special needs education options in rural contexts. Given the increased presence of articles that discuss equity and justice in the Journal, one might have expected to see more about human rights issues such as access to special needs supports. The decline of distance education as a topic reflects the normalisation of online learning as an option for learners, particularly in higher education, over the last decade.

What’s Missing? Where to Now?

While the volumes cover a lot of ground, there are missing topics which are of critical concern to rural education. Some potential issues, which could be a focus of the Journal, are not covered. Roberts and Cuervo (2015), in their editorial for Volume 25(3), posed a useful question: “*What next for rural education research?*” (p. 1). It is quite likely that the perennials will continue for some time, but what is perhaps more important is the long list of largely unexplored topics that could form the basis of future research. The list of topics in Table 7 is not exhaustive and could be expanded; for example, another potentially useful exploration would be an examination of rural education research methodologies. This topic has not been considered in this article, but it may be pursued in a separate article.

Table 7. Possible topics for future research and publication

Topic	Explanation
K–12 schools	Many rural schools are designed to cater across the phases of learning K–12. The United States typically has only state schools to service small country towns. In Australia, state schools are structured to cater for all grades (sometimes called District High Schools and sometimes Area Schools). Little research appears to have covered this significant feature of education in rural areas.
Articles from non-English academic research	While the number of articles from international lead authors has increased considerably and is likely to continue—with articles from African, European, Asian and North American countries featuring regularly—so far, no articles have explored rural education in Latin America (except Cruz-Arcila, 2017), Eastern Europe, or the Middle East. Part of the issue here is that the Journal’s editorial team and host (SPERA) is Australia-centric where English is the dominant language. This creates missed opportunities in cultural spaces that offer rich insights into rural education.
Inclusive education: Disabilities, migrants and refugees	In general, equity and justice are well covered in the Journal, although specific issues, such as educational support for people with disabilities, are barely touched on. “Disability,” for example, appears only twice in an article title or abstract (du Plessis & Bailey, 2000; Li, 2018). Similarly, the words “migrant” or “refugee” appear only five times in an article title or abstract (Gouwens & Henderson, 2017; Kline et al., 2014; Major et al., 2013; Penman & Sawyer, 2013; Yang, 2022), and these only in the last decade.

Topic	Explanation
Adult literacy	While there is a strong focus on literacy throughout the Journal, the focus on adult literacy is very limited. This is perhaps related to the declining presence of articles about adult education more generally. However, adult literacy remains an important issue, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in rural and remote areas, as noted by Ratcliffe and Boughton (2019). More research on this important topic will fill a critical gap.
Religious education and faith-based schools	Among the different sectors and models of education, references to religious or faith-based schools are scarcely made in the Journal. There are just six articles that refer to these terms in their abstract or title. And yet, according to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) school list (https://asl.acara.edu.au/School-Search), 490 of 2190 schools located in regional and remote areas are independent or Catholic schools, with most of the independent schools being faith-based.
History of rural education	Only six articles explore historical issues (Boylan, 2012; Brady, 2012; Claudi, 2021; Freeman, 1993; Hemmings, 1995; Moore, 1998). The lessons learned from history are important for rural education.
Education and climate change/ environmental sustainability	Given the significance of climate change on rural communities and industries, one might expect that the intersection between environmental sustainability, climate change and education might be evident in the content of the Journal. While there are about 20 articles that mention climate change, it is not a prominent topic for research.
Mental health and wellbeing	Mental health was hardly mentioned in the 1990s and 2000s, and while it has become more prominent in the last decade, there are only four articles where “mental health” is mentioned in the title (Lester & Mander, 2020) or the abstract (Evans et al., 2013; Jervis-Tracey et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2012). Despite the recognition of mental health, wellbeing and suicide affecting rural communities, these issues are under-researched in any education sector within the Journal.
Ethics of rural education	Only four articles referred to ethics in their title or abstract (Burns, 2020; Jervis-Tracey et al., 2012; Kline et al., 2014; O'Dowd, 2010). While many articles point to ethical clearance from an institutional committee, the general absence of articles that discuss ethical practice or ethical research in rural education within the Journal suggests that, by and large, ethics is a forgotten topic that should deserve attention.

With these issues open for exploration, the question might well be asked: How do we get there? In part, this requires some strategic thinking on the part of SPERA and the editorial team. One strategy is to continue to diversify the Editorial Advisory Board to ensure adequate representation of groups that may be able to guide the editorial team in targeted areas. Another possibility may be to cast the net wider, to capture the views of researchers who are not currently aligned to rural education research, but whose interests intersect.

Conclusions

This article has provided an overview of the content of the SPERA journal (1991–2023): *Education in Rural Australia*, later named the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*. The analysis has identified recurring themes which appear consistently over 33 volumes of the Journal. Among the themes that emerge from the analysis, community and relationships are clearly positioned at the centre of the research and practice of rural education. Connecting with this theme, other perennial issues are reported on: aspiration, success and achievement; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; deficit discourses; justice, equity and rights; parents and family; resourcing and funding; rurality and place; teacher preparation. These issues are those that, despite overwhelming evidence, remain unresolved for rural and remote education. Other issues have gained prominence over the decades: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education including international Indigenous education, attendance and truancy, collaboration, educational leadership, health and wellbeing, transitions and pathways, and workforce issues, while others have waxed and waned, such as theory and philosophy, and the role of technology.

The Journal has covered a lot of ground in its history of 500 articles, and has built a valuable evidence base for practitioners, researchers, policy advisors and policy implementers. But there is more to be done, and there are some holes in the evidence base which could or should be a focus of future research. For example, the growing internationalisation of the Journal has mostly been focused on English-speaking countries, while a whole continent (South America) is yet to present an article. Other issues are barely touched on, including the ethics of rural education research and practice, the role of faith-based schools, mental health and wellbeing, climate change and rural environmental sustainability, marginalised groups such as migrants, refugees and people with disabilities, and education at the intersection of youth detention and prisons. Our recommendations are firstly, to build on past research by offering solutions to perennial issues, and secondly, to focus on the identified gaps in the research to stimulate future research.

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Appendix A

Comparison of Australian and International Articles by Theme, with Chi-Square Probability

	Number of Australian articles	Number of international articles	Percentage of Australian articles	Percentage of international articles	Chi-square probability
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	211	23	48%	36%	
Aspiration success and achievement	401	62	92%	97%	
Attendance and truancy	292	48	67%	75%	
Collaboration	340	54	78%	84%	
Community and relationships	424	63	97%	98%	
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment	381	58	87%	91%	
Deficit discourses	421	62	97%	97%	
Educational leadership	304	52	70%	81%	
Equity, rights and justice	352	54	81%	84%	
Gender and difference	146	25	33%	39%	
Health and wellbeing	255	46	58%	72%	p<.05
Information and communication technology	316	50	72%	78%	
Literacy and numeracy	259	40	59%	63%	
Parents and family	358	54	82%	84%	
Policy and politics	322	57	74%	89%	p<.05
Resourcing and funding	385	63	88%	98%	
Rurality and place	412	58	94%	91%	
Teacher preparation	397	56	91%	88%	
Theory and philosophy	259	46	59%	72%	
Transitions and pathways	291	41	67%	64%	
Workforce	286	46	66%	72%	
Total articles	436	64	74%	79%	

Appendix B

Special Issues of ERA and the AIJRE

Year	Volume (Issue)	Topic	Number of articles with international lead authors	Number of articles with Australian lead authors
2022	32(2)	Educating for Cultural Sustainability	7	3
2020	30(2)	Boarding Schools for Rural and Remote Families: Panacea or Problem?	1	9
2019	29(1)	Rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education	2	7
2018	28(2)	Rural Education in China	6	3
2018	28(1)	Aligning AIJRE Research with the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education	0	12
2017	27(3)	A Small Place: Challenges and Opportunities for/in Tasmanian Rural and Regional Education	0	13
2017	27(2)	Rural Schools as Hubs for Socio-Educational Development of Communities	8	3
2015	25(3)	What Next for Rural Education Research?	0	8
2007	17(1)	International Perspectives on Challenges Facing Rural Education	7	2
			31	60