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The Importance of Local Voices in Rural Communities

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Abstract

In this issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, our authors explore the importance of giving voice to people whose lives and learning journeys are entwined with ‘the rural’. The articles reflect the concerns of Australian First Nations students and researchers, of young people and medical students on a vocational pathway, and of Nigerian people navigating risks in post-secondary education. They also reflect the voices of researchers who have contributed to the Journal for over 30 years.

Keywords: *First Nations research, Kimberley schools, engagement, attendance, boarding school, transition to the workplace, rural intention, clinical placement, risk management, environmental risks, career advice, post-secondary education, First Nations researchers, First Nations voices*

Editorial

In this last issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* for 2023 we have eight articles with authors from Australia, Zimbabwe, and Kazakhstan who share perspectives about the factors that impact students enrolling in universities in regional areas, Indigenous students transitioning to the workplace post boarding school, rural intention of medical students, the important role of Indigenous researchers, career education in rural communities and perennial issues and trends in rural education. A recurrent and crucial theme is listening to the community voices and the voices of those impacted most by the research.

In Australia, ‘Voice’ has been a front of mind topic for many people, with a referendum having been held on whether or not to recognise First Nations people in the constitution, with a voice to parliament. While the proposition for change was rejected, it is interesting to note how people in rural and remote communities voted. First Nations people voted with a resounding ‘yes’ and non-Indigenous people voted with a resounding ‘no’. The divergence in opinion across rural and remote parts of Australia reflects to a large degree how differently people perceive issues such as culture, language, health, education, justice, and housing, among others—as they affect First Nations people. One group feel like they haven’t been heard, and the other—it could be argued—do not want to hear their voices. The failure of the referendum of course does not mean that voice does not matter. Voices in research are of primary importance, and this issue examines this priority.

The *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, and its predecessor *Education in Rural Australia*, reached a key milestone this year. The release of the first issue this year (March 2023) coincided with publication of the 500th contribution to the Journal. Over 32 years, the Journal has reported on research and practice that gives voice to people who are learning and teaching in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, and increasingly, across the world. Noting this milestone, the editorial team felt that it was a good idea to take stock of what the Journal has contributed, and more importantly, what has been learnt through research over the years. The result of this stocktake is an essential research article that explores the full archive of the Journal and identifies perennial issues and emerging trends in rural education research and practice. The team effort and analysis from John Guenther, Melyssa Fuqua, Sue Ledger, Serena Davie, Hernan Cuervo, Laurence Lasselle and Natalie Downes is notable not so much for what it found, but more so for what it did not find, pointing those of us doing rural education research, to future priorities. Also noteworthy, is the finding that many of the issues that resonated with researchers and practitioners 32 years ago, are still alive and well today: issues such as resourcing, teacher preparation, rural student aspirations, contextually responsive curriculum, deficit discourses, and rurality/place. Given all the research undertaken over more than three decades, surely some of these perennial issues might have been put to bed! Whether this is an issue for translation of research into policy and practice, or whether it is a product of the ongoing and persistent positioning of the rural as peripheral to national interest, is hard to say. What we can be confident of though, is that there is a body of evidence that *can* inform policy and practice. Some things have changed over the 32 years. In relation to the topic of ‘voice’, it is pleasing to see that First Nations people are now not just the subject of research, but are increasingly using their voices in the Journal. It took 20 years for an article to be published by a First Nations person (Gorringer, 2011). It is pleasing to see that in recent years First Nations academics are publishing articles from Indigenous standpoints, both from Australia and elsewhere in the world. Two important First Nations contributions are included in this issue.

A vast number of initiatives have been implemented in the last ten years to address differences in outcomes between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians (Guenther et al., 2019). Boarding schools play a critical role in the education of many secondary First Nations students from remote communities. Marnee Shay and colleagues’ paper captures the thoughts and voices of young Aboriginal people from remote communities transitioning to life beyond boarding school. Importantly, in terms of ‘voice’, the methodology did not only engage the students as research participants, but as knowledge producers. Identifying opportunities and challenges for young First Nations students has the potential to improve their transition into life beyond boarding. This study was conducted by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers yarning with young Aboriginal students. The importance of working with key role models such as Elders and family members were highlighted as key influencers of successful post boarding school transition of young First Nations students.

Keith McNaught and Colette Rhoding discuss the need for policy and process changes to the allocation of rural clinical placements for medical students. The demand for rural placements exceeds supply but there is a shortage of rural medical professionals. The paper explores the factors that influence medical students’ rural intention focusing on those who initially have a neutral view. Here, the voices of students are critically important for policy and practice, not just from a pragmatic perspective—where gaps need filling—but, as the authors argue, from a moral and ethical perspective.

The paper by Anthony Eniola and colleagues also looks at young people’s post-secondary school pathways but in the context of three rural areas in Nigeria. More specifically, the authors examine whether youth perceptions of health, security, and environmental risks influence student enrolment at private universities in rural places. The findings from Eniola and colleagues

show that students' understandings about the management of security risks do not significantly associate with student enrolment but that health and environmental risks are crucial for university enrolment. By this, the authors do not downplay the issue of security in the country but show that the management of health risks, for example, is vital for university leadership if they are going to enjoy healthy student in-take. Finally, Eniola and colleagues' findings relate to a broader issue, the sustainability of rural higher education institutions and, thus, communities. Again, the points raised by the authors demonstrate the vital role of student voice, without which, decisions about risk mitigation could be based purely on legal/regulatory requirements. Knowing what students think becomes important—if they are indeed listened to—for developing a teaching and learning culture where safety is prioritised because it improves wellbeing, satisfaction, and potentially improves retention.

In several of the papers in this issue, the role of community occupies a key place when thinking about the aspirations and pathways for rural students. The link between community and school has been a central research theme in rural education (Cuervo, 2014; Morrison & Ledger, 2020; Watson et al., 2017). In their paper, Sue Kilpatrick and colleagues shift the attention from students' aspirations and views of their future towards the role of 'key influencers' (e.g. families, teachers, employers) and the whole community in young people's post-school pathways. This is a novel approach in rural education pathways research. Using a Community Participatory Research approach, Kilpatrick and colleagues examine how a whole community approach, including an alliance between community members and researchers, can enhance and support key influencers to shape students' post-school pathways. Their findings reveal that community-researcher partnerships can support key influencers in providing rural youth with endogenous, sustainable, accessible, place-based information and tools and strategies to make a life. Ultimately, the authors argue for place-based and community ownership when it comes to students' pathways interventions. 'Community ownership' of course reflects the aspirational voice of community, and allows for successful place-based strategies, which in turn lead to community specific benefits—in this case, improved post-school pathways for a community's young people.

In the rural connections paper Catherine Ridley elaborates on the importance of First Nations leaders taking control of their research and relaying their experiences. Catherine discusses the value of supporting First Nations staff, who are the unofficial leaders in their schools to become qualified school leaders. The main differences between attendance—an administrative requirement—and engagement, which is about education and learning, are highlighted. First Nations teachers and leaders have access to the community knowledge that can be pivotal to the success of students in remote communities.

Finally in this issue, John Guenther provides a book review of Jason Cervone's *Towards Rural Education for the Common Good*. Cervone, who has published in the Journal previously (Cervone 2019) offers readers a pessimistic view of rural education in the United States, based on an assessment of the dominance of neoliberal capitalism's power, and the lack of 'potency' in rural communities. This book is interesting, and requires the reader to think a lot. That is probably a good thing!

Coming back to 'voice', the editorial team is conscious of its own limitations in promoting the voices of those who would be considered to be at the periphery. As a predominantly European heritage team, comprised of mostly privileged academics (or former academics) we could be fairly accused of being unrepresentative of most people who live in regional, remote and rural communities. If the Journal is to truly examine concerns of rural education in Australian and international contexts, we could expect to see changes in the makeup of our editorial team and international advisory board. Looking forward to another 32 years, readers will hopefully reflect on the Journal, and say that it truly does reflect the diverse voices of rural people, through the

content, the authors, the editorial team and its advisory board. Unlike Cervone, we can be more optimistic about the future of rural education research.

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