



## Thinking About Rural Education and Binary Logic

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### Abstract

Although definitions of *rural* vary across educational research projects and from country to country, an enduring theme has been the framing of rural as a disadvantage or problem that sits alongside a view of the urban as normative. In questioning the urban/rural binary and the deficit discourses that are associated with it, the authors present four short data excerpts and their thinking about how they represent rural education in their research. They conclude that the telling of positive stories about rural education is a move towards changing the discourses that circulate.

**Keywords:** binaries, binary logic, counternarratives, deficit discourses, rural education, stereotypes

### Introduction

Over the years, much has been written about rural schools, what education is like in rural schools, and what it means to be a rural school. Roberts and Guenther (2021) explained that “*rural*’ is a seemingly straightforward concept, until we attempt to define it” (p. 13). In fact, definitions of rural education are multiple, but recent literature has suggested that one way of making sense of *rural* is to consider it as “*a catchall for places situated beyond major metropolitan centres and those who identify with spaces beyond those centres*” (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021, p. 2), a definition that takes place, space and geography into consideration.

The idea for this paper came from discussions at an international educational research conference. In many of the sessions, researchers presented data from rural schools. It was apparent that definitions of *rural* varied across research projects and from country to country. Even at the simplest level, rural varied from communities situated on the fringes of large cities to communities that were very long distances from urban locations, or even separated from other populated areas by geographical barriers, such as mountain ranges or deserts. Yet, what seemed to stand out in the data was how staff in rural schools—teachers, principals/headteachers, ancillary staff—were dealing with issues that probably never make educational rulebooks or policy guidelines. Such issues can make rural education stand apart from mainstream education, which is generally urban education.

In the literature, we hear about the urban/rural binary (Guenther et al., 2023). As Roberts et al. (2024) explained, “*as educational researchers we have been disciplined to accept a binary logic of city/country; urban/rural; cultured/rustic; connected/isolated*” (p. 125). Such binaries were

discussed by Davies and Hunt (2000), who noted that difference is “understood as a deviance” from the characteristics that are regarded as “normal” (p. 108), and this can lead to stereotyping. Davies and Hunt used “the concept of marking” (p. 108) to explain how the out-of-the-ordinary category of a binary pair (in this article, the rural) is recognised by its difference from the unmarked category (i.e., the urban).

This makes us wonder about the question: Can we move beyond binary logic? Davies (2000) highlighted the challenges of wanting to do this, while Roberts et al. (2024) said that there are “advantages for researchers—establishing ‘rural’ as ‘difference’ and constructing it as a research variable” (p. 125). A recent analysis of articles published in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* highlighted that “rural disadvantage is clearly assumed as normative” in many articles, with multiple authors talking about “disadvantage ... problems ... barriers to be overcome ... complexities ... and general concerns” (Guenther et al., 2023, p. 4). In addition, Guenther et al.’s (2023) analysis of journal articles showed that deficit discourses constituted a perennial theme that frames “rural and remote as an inherent disadvantage” (p. 4).

Some researchers, though, have talked about efforts to move away from the use of binaries, stereotypes and deficit discourses. Roberts et al. (2024), for example, argued for engaging “with the complexity of rurality” as a way of countering the broad-brush approach that focuses “on rural populations as a category of difference, ‘a group’ that is ‘other’ than a metropolitan norm” (p. 141). Henderson (2021) talked about her conscious decision to shape her research “around positive stories” (p. 160), as a way of trying to move beyond deficit discourses and “reclaim the rural in productive ways” (Donehower et al., 2012, p. xv).

How, then, do we talk and write about the rural? Do we take up the urban/rural binary to show, for example, that the rural is not considered in educational policy? Or do we deliberately set out to not take up the rural disadvantage perspective? This question made us think further:

- Do we take up the urban/rural binary without thinking?
- Or do we deliberately try to avoid it?
- If we try to avoid it, how do we do that?

To try to answer these questions, we have each selected a small piece of data from our research about the rural. We will now reflect on those data to consider:

- How have I (or how might I) talk about the data? What is my interpretation of the excerpt?
- What assumptions do I have about rural education? How have I dealt with (or how might I deal with) the urban/rural binary and deficit discourses about rural education?
- How might researchers talk about rural education to avoid binary logic and deficit thinking?

We recognise that our thinking is tentative. We are simply exploring these ideas. However, we think that such exploration is warranted, if we are to be seen as researchers in the field of rural education. We also think that it is important to share our ideas and to engage in conversations about this issue with others in the field.

#### **Four Excerpts of Data**

##### **From Anne’s Research**

The first excerpt comes from Anne’s research. This is an account from a primary school headteacher in a small rural school in Scotland. The data were collected as part of ethnographic fieldwork in the small rural school.

*Arrive at school, notice the cows have been in the playground. Get in the building, phone the farmer, ask him to come and fix the fence. Outside to try and shovel the muck before the bus arrives. Farmer arrives, says he’ll fix the fence later but will drive the cattle to the next field for the meantime. I realise I’ve been at school for an hour and haven’t put on my laptop*

*yet. I haven't changed out of my wellies yet. ... Bus arrives, help all the pupils put on their wellies. The children notice the toilets are not flushing. I phone property, fill in a property order, find a printed register because I can't actually print one because no Wi-Fi. ... the phone rings to say that we are too far away for the plumber to come before the afternoon. I climb into the attic to see if I can fix the plumbing. The bell rings. Time to start the day.*

I arrived at a similar time to the headteacher, rolled up my sleeves and helped her. Working as a “collaborative ethnographer” (Lassiter, 2005, p. 96), I was not only observing her problem-solving skills but sharing her can-do attitude. This gave me a deep insight into the daily leadership tasks of the small rural school. On this day, the headteacher had arrived at the school to find that lots of issues needed to be addressed: cattle in the playground, a broken fence, and plumbing requiring attention. These were not what you would call educational issues, but they were essential to ensure that the school children’s day ran smoothly.

As a researcher with a background in rural education, the fusion of practical knowledge with academic research gave me a lens of being, seeing, thinking and writing. Through this lens, I viewed the uniqueness of rural school leadership and saw that it was often misunderstood, with a perception that it is easy to be a rural school headteacher with a small number of children in a rural location. From the data excerpt, it is evident that the headteacher role requires skills, flexibility, knowledge, resilience and general ability to cope; yet the role is often undervalued. Thomson (2000) described the importance of the uniqueness—the “thisness” of rural schools and their place in society (p. 157)—and argued against the holistic approach of treating all schools the same in relation to policy and social context.

In Scotland, education leadership programs are predominately led with an urban bias. The data I have collected demonstrate that small school leadership is not just about teaching a multigrade class; it is complex, requiring a flexible style and an awareness of context. Yet Scottish headteacher salaries are linked to how many people (children and staff) a headteacher manages. Therefore, the small rural school headteacher role attracts the smallest salary, and there is an inbuilt assumption that less complex skills are required compared to an urban school headteacher with a much larger school roll and more members of staff.

In selecting the data excerpt, I wanted to demonstrate the complexities of leadership required by small rural school headteachers. They drive “the visioning process of moral purpose and future direction whilst maintaining the day-to-day operation of the school” (Davies, 2004, p. 19). This involves being nimble, flexible and adaptable.

### **From Loreto’s Research**

In Loreto’s data, we hear from a teacher, who is also the parent of an autistic child, about some of the advantages of sending children to a rural school in Chile.

*Having a double role here at the school is not so difficult to me, but it has been for other colleagues ... I manage to dissociate both roles. Sometimes in teacher meetings we talk about my son, as he has special education needs, and to me it is just like talking about any other student, because this has nothing to do with me as a mother. Whenever a colleague needs to talk to me about my son, I listen to them and never become defensive. ... One of the things I really like about this is that I have the opportunity to have my son here with me ... he struggled a lot in another [not rural] school he went to. But since I brought him here, he has really thrived, he is happy, and I can spend more time with him than what I would be able to if he went to another school.*

The data excerpt makes it clear that the parent has high regard for the education offered in the rural school where she works. The reason behind her comment has to do with the overall educational quality her child receives, especially in relation to the relationships that are built in the school. In this particular case, the rural school prides itself on being an inclusive place

oriented towards the community's care; as a result, all children enjoy spending their day there and feel they are an important part of the community.

The data come from my doctoral thesis work, which had an ethnographic focus, and was carried out in the area where I lived. These aspects allowed me to interpret what I saw and heard in the rural school separate from the deficit discourse I encountered when starting in the field of educational research. The excerpt illustrates only one of the aspects where the deficit discourse was challenged in my data, where teachers, students, parents and neighbours alike felt happy and fulfilled with the rural school. I have found that mainstream educational research has partially failed to account for these positive aspects of rural schools that yield a lot of knowledge from which other schools might benefit.

### **From Imam's Research**

From Imam's data, we hear about teachers who were working without pay. The teacher in the excerpt was working in Eastern Java, Indonesia.

*The teacher stated: "I am not paid for eight months now. The only information I got is that the yayasan [the private foundation running the school] don't have money." The teacher accepted this condition because it was a common practice that teachers become accustomed to helping the yayasan and the kyai [society leaders] to establish education in their area without payment or with a small salary which is called bisyaroh. This was not a payment; it was reimbursement for a number of teacher expenses, such as photocopying or the money teachers spent on petrol for their motorcycles, which were used for daily transportation to their schools in rural and remote locations. (Machfudi, 2017, p. 110)*

The data excerpt demonstrates the challenges for teachers in rural schools, as well as their dedication to their jobs and their willingness to work in difficult circumstances. Underpaid teachers, in particular, seem to have built significant complexities in their endeavour to improve quality education in Indonesia. On the one hand, many teachers have provided students with good learning materials to help them meet curriculum targets. On the other hand, they often need side jobs or extra jobs in the evening to enable them to meet their family expenses which are also crucial.

In such challenging circumstances, the teachers demonstrate a professional commitment to their students, often with devastating effects on their personal lives and their families, with no promise that the situation will improve. The positive story occurs because of the teachers' high motivation to teach and help their students build their own definitions of successful learning and teaching processes. Despite this difficult situation, there is still a hope that there will be accessible and worthy supports from the community for teachers' professional development in the future.

### **From Robyn's Research**

Robyn's data present a conversation between three teachers who work in schools situated in Western Queensland in Australia. The schools are located in farming and sheep areas, which are approximately 10 hours' drive from the state's capital city. The teachers describe their experiences of living in that location. Although such experiences are sometimes seen as unfavourable, the teachers regard their rural and remote experiences as valuable.

*Brady: When you're in a remote area, remote town, it can become the fishbowl effect or a bubble.*

*Olivia: They know what you're eating, they know what you're drinking.*

- Brady: *What happens when you come from living and teaching in a rural area back to the big city? My direct experience of that is isolation, from going to the shops where people talk to you ...*
- Olivia: *Yeah, do the shopping for you.*
- Brady: *To going to a huge shopping centre where no one talks to you; where you go to the service station and the guy won't talk to you about who's going to win the footy; you fill up the fuel yourself.*
- Emily: *In rural and remote places, there's such a lot of personal growth and social growth and you establish friendships in those places because of the situation.*

I come to these data with long-term experience as an educational researcher. More than two decades ago, I was worried about the prevalence of deficit discourses in the data I was collecting. This caused me to reflect on what it was that I wanted as the focus of my research, how I was conducting that research, and what I was achieving in relation to educational practice. The outcome of those reflections was that I made a decision to focus on positive stories in rural education. I hoped I was doing what Luke (2002) had advocated: wanting educational researchers to get their “*hands dirty with the sticky matter of what educationally is to be done*” (p. 54), rather than just critiquing the current state of play. I wanted to share what was working.

In the data I have presented here, what I see is an opportunity to present a positive story about teaching in a rural location. Interestingly, Brady's statement, supported by Olivia, sets up the urban/rural binary, with his initial focus on a perceived disadvantage of living in a rural town. He describes the experience metaphorically: “*the fishbowl effect or a bubble.*” Yet, Brady goes on to manipulate the binary with a negative about the urban experience: “*isolation.*” At the end, Emily adds further supportive positives about the rural: “*personal growth and social growth and ... friendships.*”

Although I would say that I usually try to stay away from binaries, this example enables me to use the language of Comber and Kamler (2004) to say that the urban/rural binary has been “*turned around*” (p. 302). Rather than describing rural teaching in deficit terms, a more balanced picture was presented by the teachers, with the conclusion focusing on positives.

I am not sure that I am doing the dirty and sticky work that Luke (2002) intended, but I am of the opinion that we need to share positive stories like these, especially to our future teachers. When stories come from teachers who have had rural experiences, then I think those stories can have a powerful message for pre-service and new teachers who might not have thought about a future in a rural area.

## Discussion

In selecting and examining excerpts from our research data, the four of us engaged in some deep thinking about binaries and how we represent rural education in our research. Because there are only four of us and four small pieces of data, we are not trying to make any grand claims. Rather, we are trying to think through where we stand on the issue of binary logic and rural education. Despite four international contexts (Scotland, Chile, Indonesia and Australia), there seem to be several similarities in what we are thinking.

It is evident that we are all concerned by the use of binaries that establish the rural as the unmarked category (Davies & Hunt, 2000) of an urban/rural binary. In trying to counter such a view, we have been trying to promote rural contexts as diverse locations that cannot be stereotyped. Anne's excerpt highlighted the diverse and non-educational activities of a rural

headteacher's job. These were the types of jobs that had to be done; otherwise, the school could be classed as unsafe or unhygienic for children.

Similarly, Imam described some of the challenges experienced by rural teachers and the impact on their personal lives. Such actions were well beyond what we would say is a call-of-duty; indeed, the teachers were not being paid for their teaching. This is not the teaching profession that those of us in the developed world know, but it is vitally important for children living in rural and remote areas in parts of Indonesia. For Anne and Imam, foregrounding the challenges is part of making the realities of rural education visible to others. These are not the educational actions that are described in policy guidelines and teaching manuals, but they are essential for education in the contexts described.

In a similar way, Loreto focused on the positives in a rural school to show how it was inclusive and a model for what education should be like for special needs students. Loreto wanted to make those aspects visible, so that there was a challenge to the deficit stories that were in circulation. Likewise, Robyn explained her deliberate move to focus on positive stories and, where possible, to “turn around” deficit discourses (Comber & Kamler, 2004, p. 302). By foregrounding positive stories, Loreto and Robyn hoped to change the stories told and thus challenge the stereotypes of deficit discourses.

### Conclusion

For all of us, the telling of positive stories about rural education is important, because it means we are able to offer representations that show diversity within rural contexts and difference from urban education. We want difference to be recognised as difference, not as better or worse than urban education; we want to highlight what is different as a way of showing that context, geography, place and space are important.

We do not have a plan to change the binary and put rural into the unmarked position (Davies & Hunt, 2000); our intention is to show the richness and fullness of rural education and to contribute counternarratives to the deficit stories and discourses in circulation. In this way, we are trying to debunk deficit discourses by showing their inaccuracies and by presenting detailed positive accounts of rural education. Although we think that deficit discourses are difficult to shift and that binary logic is a taken-for-granted way of thinking for many, we hope that our approach provides food for thought for thinking about diversity and difference in the rural education field.

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