

WHAT NEXT FOR RURAL EDUCATION RESEARCH?

Philip Roberts

University of Canberra

Hernán Cuervo

The University of Melbourne

Where are we going in rural education research? Looking at the field over the last decade indicates an overwhelming focus on preparing teachers for rural schools, a concern on rural student achievement, on access to higher education (e.g. Bradley, 2008) and on high-stakes testing (e.g. Gonski, 2011). While these streams of research are important, they are bound by a view of rural schooling as lacking and disadvantaged vis a vis their metropolitan counterparts. In the process the rural is often ‘othered’ in comparison to a metropolitan norm.

Nearly a decade ago Arnold and colleagues (2005) reviewed the ‘condition’ of rural education research with the aim of proposing a new agenda. In this review they argued that there were few experimental or comparative studies and proposed an agenda that addressed this perceived limitation. While they did acknowledge the difference of the rural and the need of researchers to understand school-community links, they largely suggested what may now be seen as a positivist and neoliberal influenced agenda. Commenting critically, this agenda seems aimed at understanding the causes of the average lower outcomes for rural students and examining approaches to ensure achievement tends more towards the average. This proposed agenda provoked a much-cited response by Howley, Theobald and Howley (2005) who questioned: ‘What rural education research is of most worth?’ In so doing, they challenged the positivist and overcoming deficit orientation to all things rural to instead suggest rural education research must engage with rural meanings and rural places as valuable and important. This, they argued, necessitated an orientation to understanding what works for rural communities –rather than for government bureaucracies or national business– and may involve more qualitative approaches than Arnold and colleagues proposed. Howley, Howley and Yahn (2014) recently returned to this critique about the nature of rural research, by suggesting that much rural research focuses upon overcoming the implied deficiencies of rural people and places, with the rural being somewhat of an afterthought – that is, the rural is not valued in its own right or seen as generative to the research. In this sense, they reaffirm the idea that the rural ‘lifeworld’ that shapes what happens in schools is a key component of any rigorous rural education research.

While the debate cited above emanates from a North American context, its gesturing was towards the field in general. These concerns were by no means North American only. Going back a decade further, Sher and Sher’s (1994) seminal article asked researchers to genuinely value (Australia’s) rural people and communities. They pleaded with us to undertake our work ‘as if rural people and communities *really* mattered’ (Sher & Sher, 1994). We note however that this article was also in relation to ‘rural development’ so was subtly informed by the lingering rural

deficit perspective. Nonetheless, we want to remind researchers about the ethical considerations of valuing people and places and point out that these are not new considerations.

Nor are these debates confined to the North American journals (all the previously cited work appeared in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*). Ten years ago, Maree Brennan argued for the importance of 'Putting rurality on the educational agenda' (2005) in this journal. Here Brennan (2005) argued that rurality had been largely missing from educational research, other than the typical trope of disadvantage and staffing issues. In response she advocated for a more nuanced understanding of rural education drawing upon contemporary social theory. Worryingly these same themes emerge in the articles in this special edition – it would seem that despite these debates, and pleas, these issues remain as important today as they did a decade ago. Drawing upon these ideas Roberts (2014a) has suggested that in contemporary research the rural is often a setting or convenient example and as such does little to understand rurality or how it is implicated in research. He has suggested that: 'If the research is not advancing an understanding of the rural, for the rural, it may be just enacting symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) against the places it purports to represent by inadvertently treating them as a curiosity or constructing them as deviant.' (Roberts, 2014a, p.135).

Perhaps the most developed uses of rurality in research comes from work in relation to rural literacies (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007; Green & Corbett, 2013), rural social space (Reid et al., 2010) and rural research methodologies (White & Corbett, 2014). Here researchers begin to engage with contemporary social theory and entwine education, rurality and the social condition to develop insights into each. It is our aim in this special edition to expand the boundaries of the rural education research field to value rural people and communities and ensure rurality is central to the research agenda. We do this by provoking the rural education field to think differently about its research.

The edition arose as an outcome of a one-day symposium organised by the Rural Education special interest group of the Australian Association for Research in Education in December 2014. Specifically, part of the aim of the edition is to explore connections with the disciplines of rural sociology and rural geography. We argue that these fields, and rural education, only have a limited engagement with each other and that each could benefit from more productive and sustained conversations. For example, work on rural youth mobility due to the reconfiguration of local economies (see Corbett 2007, Kenway, Kraack, & Hickey-Moody, 2006), on the political and economic impact of policy in rural schooling (Cuervo, 2016; Howley, Howley, & Johnson, 2014; Tieken, 2014), and on the relationship of place, community, identity and sustainability in rural lifeworlds (Green, 2008; Roberts, 2014b; Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010) are all important contributions that cross the disciplines of education, geography, sociology and beyond. However, more can be done. We suggest the need for a broader discussion about rural education issues that will encompass local and global trends, education policy, methodology and research in rural education studies, among other significant issues. Central to this discussion is the need to challenge that in many studies that pass as 'rural' the meaning and nature of rurality is not central to the research or often taken for granted.

THE RURAL STANDPOINT

What does it mean to take rural seriously in education studies? And, can rural become much more than a backdrop to education studies? This special issue explores these issues with the aim of offering new conceptual and theoretical ways of understanding rural education in its different spheres. The different articles assembled contribute to move the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the field forward and challenge some of the developing insularities of the field. The idea of the special issue is also to explore theoretical and empirical developments and intersections in studies of education and rural issues, as well as discussing the kinds of interdisciplinary engagements that this might involve. The articles are organised around the theme of 'provocations' and together we hope that they provide a road map for future research in rural education. This map builds on existing, and long running, debates in this space and recent

scholarship. Where this edition departs from these past trends is the explicit engagement with sociological and geographical thinking as part of what we suggest is a way beyond this cycle of self-critique.

Through the papers collected in this edition we see that the rural is not only a setting and should not be taken for granted. Instead the rural is generative of educational, social and methodological insights. Seeing the rural as generative is distinct from seeing it as a context of research, even though the notion of context may be making something of a comeback in the face of standardisation (Mills & Gale, 2011). It is important to remember that place as used increasingly in rural educational research is not context. Context, as it has been used, is more of a fixed setting without agency whereas in research we argue place and rurality are generative concepts.

Significantly, the articles highlight the difficulty of rural research – that is defining what is rural. Engaging in this discussion becomes a notable theme throughout the edition, and as such we won't dwell on such meanings here and instead let the discussions in the following papers suffice. However we do want to point out some issues. Firstly, the discussions here about definitions are not common in much research claiming to be rural education research. Secondly, the complexity of defining the space is indeed a strength and opportunity for future research. Finally, such an engagement pre-disposes the necessity of interdisciplinary research and a plurality of research methods.

Seeing the rural as generative, inherently valuable, and complex raises ethical questions about the motives for research. While some of our research may be motivated by a concern for rural people, communities and rural places, we need to guard against the subtle creep of deficit discourses. Here we suggest new thinking in relation to social justice and the rural may help positively frame our research. Influenced by notions of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and a plural social justice framework (Cuervo, 2012) recent thinking argues that much rural educational disadvantage can be seen as produced through the dominance metropolitan-cosmopolitan values (Roberts & Green, 2013). Thus putting rurality at the centre is not only a research issue but a fundamental issue of social justice. Otherwise all we are really doing is advancing the global metropolitan hegemony by working to make the rural a little less rural and more like the powerful non-rural world.

THE PROVOCATIONS

Michael Corbett, Barbara Pini and Robyn Mayes begin this special edition by introducing a number of concepts from rural sociology and rural geography respectively. Their aim is to expand the field of rural education by pushing the theoretical and empirical boundaries of what constitutes the 'rural'. Corbett argues for a stronger engagement of the conceptual tools of sociology and contemporary social theory. Drawing on the work of Saskia Sassen, Bruno Latour and other social theorists, he suggests that rural education has not yet adequately addressed the impact of globalisation forces (e.g. demographic changes, the effects of networks and communication technologies) in the local space; tending instead to operate within the framework of what might be called traditional rural imaginaries. In response to this need to reconstitute the rural and rural research, Corbett maps a range of issues and trends that can enhance the scholarship in the field: starting with a challenge to the dichotomy of material/imaginary rural space, following with the impact of population implosion and mobilities, through to more fluid networks and post-structural constructions of what constitutes rural space.

Globalisation and surveillance are particularly important considerations that raise a number of the contradictions within implied assumptions of community discussed in this edition. Often within the assumptions of rural education is the idea of the rural as a distant entity and hence free from excessive bureaucratic oversight. This in turn provides a degree of freedom from neoliberal governance technologies. However this is problematic because thinking of the rural as

outside these technologies risks falling back into romantic or deficient notions of the rural, while overlooking the real issues, including what knowledge is best situated to respond to the need of its people and communities. On the contrary, Corbett views 'rural places as a source of wealth and strength and as delicate environments that required stewardship' and also implicated and subject to the work of neoliberal governance and surveillance. Overall, he forces the rural education researcher to make connections between what happens in the school and the community with the direction of political, social and economic forces that have national and transnational genesis.

Pini and Mayes bring a rural geographical lens to the study of education and rurality, with a particular focus on broadening the meanings of rural and community. Like Corbett, they also note the lack of dialogue between rural education and other disciplines (i.e sociology and geography). They argue against familiar tropes in rural education research, including that of the close connection between schools and communities in rural areas. With reference to articles published in this journal, Pini and Mayes argue that there is a central discourse that communities are knowable and singular, homogeneous and static. This challenges rural education researchers to consider what they mean by community in their work and what it gestures towards – especially the community imagined by contemporary curriculum and the goals of schooling. Linking to Corbett's paper, and others in the edition, Pini and Mayes dwell upon what the rural means, including the universalisation of the 'rural' vis a vis the 'urban' (as the norm).

Not to discount other considerations in this edition, but these papers come at the issue specifically from a sociological and then a geographical perspective, helping illustrate the difficulty in defining the rural. As Pini and Mayes argue: 'Seldom do writers problematize these terms, recognising the distinctive socio-cultural norms, assumptions and discourses which inflect various notions of the rural and, by virtue of when, where and how they are mobilised, shape educational experiences' (p. 27). Instead they argue difference is used as the justification for much of the research focus on rural education, with the assumed difference generally asserted rather than explored. This critique reminds rural education researchers to be vigilant in their theoretical construction of the field, for to do otherwise lays a trap of relativistic usage of key concepts and themes. Through their argument that adoption and mobilisation of notions of the rural and community in a large proportion of rural educational research as unproblematic and at odds with contemporary theorising in rural geography, Pini and Mayes challenge future researchers to pay much closer attention to their use of these terms in their research.

Central to these provocations by Corbett and Pini and Mayes about what is meant by community and the rural is an implicit question about the nature of modern schooling and its core assumptions. While we return to this explicitly with Natalie Downes and Philip Roberts in a specific example, Bill Green positions this question in philosophical scope. Raising what he has termed rural-regional sustainability Green combines geographical thinking with questions of eco-justice and the very future of our planet. Such a focus asks us to critically interrogate the values and purpose of contemporary education and schooling. As Green writes: 'To speak of rural-regional sustainability is, I argue, to point to the value of looking beyond the current-traditional parameters of schooling, as a distinctive and indeed characteristic project of modernity. Moreover, rural education as a field, as I have found, tends to be framed within and by an often constraining and even conservative discursive field, one that can often close down possibilities rather than opening them up' (p. 41).

In this article Green asks us to consider new possibilities for education generally, and rural education specifically, linked to sustaining our social and ecological futures and the futures of rural places. Undoubtedly our very existence depends upon the environment, especially in the precarious times we find ourselves. This places a unique obligation on education and schools to address these challenges - one that has not yet been effectively taken up. However Green seeks to somewhat decentre this focus on humans and the environment and asks us to think broader about spaces and places. He reminds us that human social systems are at once ecological,

cultural and semiotic in character, and in provoking us to think differently suggests that regionality may be a productive concept.

Critically these are not limited to questions of environment or sustainability in the traditional sense, but are entwined with the very nature of modern schooling and education. In proposing 'a critical view of rural-regional sustainability, taking into account notions of bioregionality and ecosocial change' (p. 36) and advocating 'a reconceptualised view of public education, as explicitly embracing formal, informal and non-formal sectors' (p. 36), Green points us towards two areas for future engagement: curriculum and community education. Neither are much considered in rural education. The challenge in engaging with these areas is in doing so with the aim of rural-regional sustainability as the central motivation and not returning to tradition notions of modern schooling.

Moving from the purposes of education and schooling, to the preparation of professionals who carry out this work, Simone White brings an important ethical reframing of the issues of pre-service teacher education. Positively framed, White argues 'that rurality is everybody's business, not just for those who live in rural places' (p. 50). In considering how such a perspective could be enacted she positions the focus within a consideration of the career of teacher educators – an area of emerging research focus. Such an expansive approach asks researchers to move beyond the traditional focus in rural education research on the preparation of teachers for rural schools, not to suggest work there is complete, but that more needs to be done.

In moving the focus onto the career of teacher educators, White is arguing for a consideration of what knowledge teachers educators need and the utility of adding the rural standpoint to this. Specifically she asks what are the 'theoretical tools that all teacher educators might need to equip themselves with, in order to be inclusive of rural students' needs' (p. 50). In response, White suggests three emerging themes to focus upon 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), 'rural social space' (Reid, et al., 2010) and 'place consciousness' (Gruenwald, 2003). This 'trialectical thinking' bring us back to issues of globalisation and neoliberal audit culture raised by Corbett in the first paper, and discussed more generally in educational sociology, and suggests the unique contribution of rural education research when conceived in the broad terms discussed in this edition. The focus upon what is meant by the rural and community, and the inevitable plurality of definitions engaged with, bring a distinct focus upon the affordances of places and spaces. That is, they speak back to the increasing universalising notions that dominate much contemporary discourse about schooling and education.

Maintaining the focus on definitions within this edition, John Guenther, John Halsey and Sam Osborne place the emphasis on the implications of defining schools in locational terms (e.g. distribution of resources, measurements of disadvantage). Rather than dwell on the specific meanings of geographic terms, as per Pini and Mayes, they instead analyse how the uncritical use of locational terms can shape education – and we suggest rural education research. Guenther and colleagues illuminate the socio-cultural assumptions implied in the use of such constructs and how they create stereotypes for, and within, students, parents and teachers. Drawing a line that starts in the Adelaide suburb of Paradise and runs through to the far north of South Australia they examine data from *My School* website to develop a comparative picture of schools that cover all the typical locational classifications. What they find is that rather than some imagined continuum from an advantaged metropolitan location to disadvantaged remote location or a binary of advantaged/disadvantaged, there is instead a rich diversity of schools and communities. This approach reminds us to consider the very nature of the measures we use to categorise schools or measure and compare achievement, especially as the measures and their implied metropolitan-cosmopolitan norms are often the problem (Roberts & Green 2013). Rather than describing schools in categorical terms Guenther, Halsey and Osborne argue for a way of describing schools and locations in a manner that embraces socio-cultural and geographic diversity – thus putting into practice the more theoretical issues raised in the previous papers in this issue.

Rounding out the papers in this edition Natalie Downes and Philip Roberts return to questions about the nature of education and modern schooling. Here they explore the idea that rurality is important in children's learning, and parents aspirations for their children, even though it is in conflict with dominant educational discourses. Examining the experiences of parent supervisors of primary school aged children studying by distance education in isolated rural properties, Downes and Roberts explain that parents' choice of distance education is strictly related to the possibility of continuing living and working in rural spaces. This choice reflects the defence of the sustainability of the rural lifeworld they aim to bring their children up in. In carrying on this rural life, parents experience a conflict between the assumptions of the work they are sent to complete with their children and their own lifestyle and values. To solve this conflict, parents engage in critical curriculum work and reinterpret the lessons provided to make them more meaningful to their children.

Similar to Green, Downes and Roberts ask us to consider the dominant assumptions of schooling and how they relate to rural lifeworlds in our research, as well as matters of curriculum. The work poses the notion of rural knowledges as a form of situated knowledge linked to understandings of the rural as discussed by Corbett and Pini and Mayes. This reminds us that education is not confined to the criteria set by school authorities, and that rural education research needs to engage with the values and motivations of all participants, and explore these in relation to matters of rurality. Furthermore the work sheds light on the idea of parents as curriculum workers in these settings, an often over looked group of actors in the education process as well as curriculum enactment in place. Here place-conscious education, similar to that mentioned by White, is evoked as a curriculum approach that engages with rural places and values rural meanings.

In the last article, Ros Capeness provides a post-script looking at the policy implications of these papers. Heartening here is the recognition of the problems of rural-urban binaries and deficit thinking. Ros's postscript provides encouragement for rural education researchers to keep at, and further engage with, the ideas presented in this edition as they are the future of work in this space.

Finally, we note that missing from this edition is an explicit focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, youth and curriculum. This is not to say that no new thinking is happening in these areas or that these areas are unimportant. To the contrary they are perhaps the most important issues. Their absence is more incidental. We look forward to reading engagements with these topics in forthcoming editions of this journal.

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Philip Roberts

Philip.Roberts@canberra.edu.au

Faculty of Education, Science, Technology and Mathematics, University of Canberra

Philip is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum Inquiry at the University of Canberra. Before joining the University of Canberra Philip was a classroom teacher and Head Teacher for 14 years in rural NSW Public High schools. He has also held various positions in the teachers' union, curriculum board and teacher registration authority. Philip is chief investigator for the Towards Place Based Education in the Murray-Darling Basin project. He is the 2015 recipient of the bi-annual Australian Curriculum Studies Association-Pearson Colin Marsh award for the best paper in the preceding two years of the journal *Curriculum Perspectives*. In 2013 he was a recipient of the Vice Chancellors award for Teaching Excellence. Philip has completed major national research projects in the staffing of rural and remote schools and managed large-scale school based research projects.

Hernán Cuervo

hicuervo@unimelb.edu.au

Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Hernán Cuervo is a Senior Research Fellow & Lecturer at the Youth Research Centre and the Graduate School of Education in the University of Melbourne, Australia. His research interests focus on youth studies, rural education and theory of justice. His latest book is *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education* (Palgrave MacMillan).