**Rural-regional sustainability in the Murray Darling Basin: School / community difference and the politics of water in rural Australia**

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**Abstract**

In this paper we critically examine the role of rural schools as community hubs through the example of sustainability and natural resource scarcity. Drawing upon the first phase of a two-year project exploring education and sustainability in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) of Australia, the paper examines different understandings of community and their impact on community cohesion. A key finding has been that while both community members, and schools, regard sustainability as very important and report high levels of commitment to its pursuit, there are very different understandings of its meaning and implication for communities. The different understandings that emerged potentially creates conflict and makes the pursuit of sustainable community futures difficult. The differences observed reflect debates about community in rural areas, as well as sustainability in the research literature.

**Keywords:**sustainability, community, rural, policy, place based

**Key findings:**

* While both community members, and schools, regard sustainability as very important and report high levels of commitment to its pursuit, there are very different understandings of its meaning and implication for communities.
* The different understandings that emerged potentially creates conflict and makes the pursuit of sustainable community futures difficult.
* The differences observed reflect debates about community in rural areas, as well as sustainability in the research literature.
* Schools have much to draw on and contribute to developing community capitals in relation to sustainability in the MDB (Cocklin & Dibden, 2005), that at present, may not be fully realised.

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Dr Amy McPherson is a lecturer in Education Studies at the Australian Catholic University, North Sydney campus. Her research interests focus on progressing critical thought which interrogates the socio-political landscapes of education. Recent research projects include: a study of the relationship between spatiality, embodiment, technology and classrooms; equity and widening participation in education, constructions of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘ability’ in schooling and education for sustainability.

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Dr Philip Roberts is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum Inquiry / Rural Education at the University of Canberra.  His major ongoing research focuses on place, the sustainability of rural communities, and the interests of the least powerful in our society. Philip’s work is situated within rural sociology, the sociology of knowledge, educational sociology and social justice and is informed by the spatial turn in social theory and sustainability.

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Natalie is a research assistant at the University of Canberra. Her research interests include rural distance education, rural-regional sustainability and curriculum inquiry. This work has a particular focus upon the cultural politics of schooling for rural students. In 2014 Natalie completed her honours thesis on the experiences of parent supervisors of distance education primary school students and graduated with first class honours. She will soon start her PhD focusing on rural distance education.