

Issues in Education in Remote Rural Australia

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The term Rural Australia is being used by the Commonwealth Government in recent times very, very broadly, indeed, to encompass about ninety five percent (95%) of the Australian mainland. Indeed, it deals with virtually all of Australia that is outside the large metropolitan areas and is more than fifty (50) kilometres remote from a sizeable community. Now, having said that it embraces ninety five percent (95%) of Australia, you would realise, of course, that encompassed in that area are a number of very significant communities that are focal points for the territory around them. In a sense we might talk about those areas as being provincial Australia. If you come from provincial Australia tonight, then I apologise as my remarks are not going to be really addressed to you. I am going to take the other section that we really call remote Australia. I am talking about those smaller country towns, the small service towns. I am talking about the railway fettlers' camps. I am talking about the station properties, and the farming communities, and the isolated aboriginal communities.

My definition of rural Australia is the remote section of rural Australia and not the larger, provincial areas. Having then defined what I have taken to be rural Australia, I am restricting my remarks to only four (4) areas. I almost came in tonight with a little crystal ball and a little cloth to put over it and to do the kind of act of crystal-ball gazing and see whether in fact I could conjure up the directions that rural education might take in the future. I thought prophets are always open to criticism, they are seldom correct. So it would be safer to take a line that dealt with problems in rural education or education in rural communities that, I believe, need to be addressed.

You will notice that I equivocated a little bit and said rural education or more correctly education in rural communities. That was of necessity because quite recently when Lady Logan and I were talking to the corporate sector about funding the James Cook University's new Rural Education Research and Development Centre, we found that a number of people interpreted rural education as being Agricultural Colleges. We thought that to get the message straight, we had better start talking about education in rural communities. I assure you, tonight, that I will use both terms and that they are synonymous.

I am not talking necessarily about agricultural colleges, though they are an important part of the facilities we provide for education in rural Australia.

Well now, what are the four (4) issues that I want to talk about?

I am going to talk first about the education of girls in rural Australia. Then I want to talk about the education of Aborigines in rural Australia and thirdly I want to talk about educating rural Australians for life long learning. Finally, to suggest some critical area for research to underpin what might be the scenarios for the future. I am going to be short on specifics - or I would be here all night talking about just one of the topics - and more importantly, I go back to my opening remarks that what I hope is that by opening up a problem you'll come in and perhaps arrive at a possible solution or some directions for tackling the problems.

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The Education of Girls in Rural Australia

In 1983, I was privileged to join the Commonwealth Government's committee of review of effectiveness of the Country Areas Programme (C.A.P.) in this Nation. Being a Queenslander nominated by the Queensland Government, I was not permitted to review rural education in Queensland. In fact, I inherited the Northern Territory and South Australia, but I was certainly involved in the major "wash up" before we went to the working party in Adelaide when we shared the problems that we had found and discovered that we had so many things in common. As a result of that review, we, as a committee, became very much concerned about the problem of educating girls in rural Australia. It is very sad to say that they have been an almost neglected part of our community. This was brought home to us, time and time again, by the comments from parents of those children - as I told a group in Mt Isa the other night, a story that is factual - an event that I will not forget as long as I live - in Maree, South Australia, which used to be the exchange railway town and which is now almost deserted but it's the beginning of the Birdsville track, I sat there, after dinner, with a group of parents who had been brought in to talk with me about problems they faced in educating their children. One mother looked across the table to a twelve (12) year old girl walking along holding the hand of her three or four year old brother, and she said "Professor Scott that sums up the problem because my daughter is twelve and in four years time there is no way she is going to avoid having a child hanging on her hand that will be her own. There is nothing else for her to do." That hit home. Here was a woman who, in despair, saw no future in a small community for her daughter.

Now, we know that many of the girls in families in remote Australia have the opportunity to go away to boarding school or to go and reside in a larger town. Many don't. Many of those girls are exceedingly able and can carve out traditional careers. Many of them are average, run-of-the-mill Australian girls. Many of them have no aspiration to leave the community in which they have been reared and they look forward to a healthy life where they have been brought up. Our education system has let them down and is letting them down.

This problem carries on beyond early childhood into the late teenage years, into early adulthood, and you, yourself have seen perhaps, in your own sons and daughters who have grown up now and even have young families, or perhaps a bit older than that even who now look around in despair and crest-fallen about what they might do. Life is humdrum, life is not fulfilling their expectations of a happy and contented life. We need to think very seriously about this particular problem and the extent to which it is a problem varies very much from community to community. Rural education communities, as you know, are not identical nationwide, or statewide. You can find one rural community just fifty (50) kilometres from another which has a totally different attitude towards rearing of children and towards educational problems. But, the first problem that needs to be tackled is a community and parental attitude problem. An attitude problem about what might be done for girls to enjoy equal opportunity for fulfilment along with their brothers. The problem of getting people to realise that people are equal in all, except sex at birth. The intellectual calibre is not influenced dramatically by the sex you are but the way in which that intellectual calibre is developed is very much influenced by the kind of curriculum to which we expose children, and the attitudes we expressed to them as to whether these are "boy's things" or these are "girl's things" and never shall you cross. Now I have, ever since the sexist argument got underway, rejected being involved in that argument.

I don't think you have to engage in the argument to face up to the problem that girls are being denied equality of opportunity. We need, for example, to look very seriously at some of our practices in classrooms, to look at what we might do in distance education with regard to girls in terms of the curriculum that we offer and in which we allow girls to be selective. It is only in very recent times that we have, for example, encouraged girls to engage in the manual arts subjects, to become actively involved, not in using computers as simply a learning device, but in terms of becoming involved in higher accountancy and commercial practices. We need to broaden the curriculum electives for girls to open up the vistas for them. The other problem, of course, is that we do not have many role models for girls to see in country areas. O.K., they are on a

property and they see the models of the men. They see the models of Mum and big sister working around the property. If they go into town, they see the models of the girl in the bank, they see the model, if they happen to go to the doctor and they have a lady doctor, they see that and so. But, the range of role models for girls to see as potential avenues for a vocation are strictly limited. We have to develop systems in the future which will make it possible to let girls be exposed to the variety of role models. One of the aspirations of the Research and Development Centre at James Cook University, is to provide on land now being made available by the Queensland government a facility in Rose Bay in which groups of girls and their teachers, they don't just mean girls - boys will come as well, but it's with the same thing in mind to see role models in the community, to interact with people, to see the relative opportunities that are there if you want to take advantage of them. I have every faith that, as educators, we can progressively tackle this problem as the school level. But we don't leave people high and dry at the end of year 10 or year 12 or whatever it is when a girl decides that her formal schooling has ended. There is the movement forward into the community beyond, and into that role, for most of them, of motherhood and family rearing and idle time on their hands. And it's imperative that we begin to generate in rural areas a wide range of leisure time pursuits that cannot only bring leisure enjoyment but also can be remunerative for girls that they do a worthwhile and contributing something to the family circle.

If I had more time I'm full of suggestions on what might be done there, I would elaborate on some of them.

I don't profess to have all the answers to the problem of educating girls in rural communities. But I cannot help but be struck by the magnitude of the problem. The most recent report by the now defunct Schools Commission, *Schooling in Rural Australia* also reported in 1987 along similar lines about the problem of education of girls in rural communities. The fact that we need to provide more equal opportunities.

The Education of Aborigines in Rural Australia

Well I'll more on. I wanted to talk about the problem of Aborigines. Aborigines in Australia as you know, fall into a number of categories, but more than seventy percent (70%) of them are either urban dwellers or fringe urban dwellers in communities outside metropolitan areas. And, of course, we have the large number of Aborigines, as well who dwell in Aboriginal communities. The kinds of education that we offer to these is very different, we have community Aboriginal schools. But I won't talk primarily about that group tonight, that's an area for the specialists.

I want to talk about the group who are on station properties or who are in the small country towns, attending the primary or the secondary schools in our rural areas. It doesn't take you long, if you're honest, to recognise that the fundamental problem facing us, which is more than a problem, indeed it's a responsibility, is that of developing an Aboriginal's self respect, self esteem. And our recognising as well as the Aboriginal recognising that their Aboriginal identity is something of which they should be proud.

Aboriginal students have had a great deal of attention directed to them by the Commonwealth Government in recent years. And some very effective work is being done. But considerably more needs to be done with the money and the energies that are being put forward. I do not believe that we should be coercing Aboriginal people to live the life of a Caucasian or to live the life of the majority of Australians. But I do believe that we are obligated to provide pathways for them to pursue that lifestyle if they so wish. One of the things that faces us in rural education is ensuring that, in the standard classroom in our distance education activities, that we encourage Aboriginal students to be bicultural. Of course, if you go to the Northern Territory today you will find that they are streets ahead of almost anywhere in this Nation in terms of bilingual training, bilingual education studies and Aboriginal literacy. Areas that need to be taken seriously if we are going to come to grips with the problems of developing self respect, self esteem and opening up opportunity for any Aboriginal student who wants to take those opportunities. Now they, too, suffer as the girls from a lack of role models. One of the things we have to address in future is

how we get Aboriginal people who have, in our sense made it, - made something of their lives and who are able to be seen there as a model for Aboriginal students that that is the way an Aboriginal can be regarded and can function in our society. We have the opportunity to do it in our smaller school communities. The employment of Aboriginal teachers, the employment of Aboriginal teacher aids, the employment of Aboriginal clerical assistants or community liaison people and so on. While you'll find the hardest thing on earth to do, attempting to involve in school community committees that they feel that they have a part to play in deciding what the programme for the school will be, in deciding how the money which is raised for the community will be spent in the interests of the school. We can't turn our backs on them and say they just can't do it. I believe we have the responsibility of endeavouring to work in these directions. Now, I want to stress, I am very much aware of the very fine work which is done in many schools, and in each state with regard to the education of Aboriginal people. But the fact remains, that we've not yet done it with the degree of force, if you like and commitment that we ought to have done. So I see that along with the education of girls, the education of Aboriginals in rural Australia is a very significant problem yet to be resolved.

Education for Lifelong Learning

I said the third issue that I wanted to talk about was education for lifelong learning in rural Australia. Education is two things, it's a process, and, of course it's an accomplishment. You talk about the educational level of a person or you talk about the processes to which a person has been subjected in being educated. Sometimes education is directed towards achieving very specific targets. Our schools tend, more than they ought, to function upon specific targets, when one of the most important objectives of education is to prepare a person to cope with life as that person makes their way through life. The claims of problems that we beat day in and day out: How do we cope with them? How do we generate enjoyment? How do we become creative people well beyond school? How do we make the adjustment to changing social conditions? How do we branch into new areas of activity? The job of the school and our educational system is to educate for lifelong learning. Now in the formal settings of urban classrooms, a lot is being done and it's relatively easy to do it. It is not as easy to do it in multi-grade classrooms in country areas, or where one depends entirely upon distance education. Even with the most sophisticated technology that we have available today, it is not easy to achieve the development of those competencies that are essential for lifelong learning. True learning is not about being a sponge absorbing facts and figures, important though they may be. True learning is knowing what to do with the information when you've got it. Being able to play with the knowledge, to interact with it, to bounce it around. Good heavens you've all been to school, you all know that your Chemistry teacher will tell you the formula for water is H₂O. A useless piece of information. It isn't useless if you happen to know that that means it the combination of two gases - hydrogen and oxygen to both of which have a range of uses in our society. And which can be achieved by breaking up water. For children to test their thinking against the mind of another is a critical thing in education. You can put all you like on the video screen, you can punch all you like into the P.C., it can only talk back to you the answers that are already programmed in it. That's not what interactive learning is all about. Interactive learning is about you disagreeing with me or picking up my idea and running with it, or testing it, whether it'll work or it won't work. Can we solve the problem this way or that way? This is what our rural kids are denied, in many situations, and this is something that we have to address, how we get the interactive element into the learning experiences that are going on in our classrooms. The right to hope when our children finish their formal school learning that they've acquired two things as a result of it. First, they have acquired a scent of intellectual skills, of thinking processes that allow them to relate to experiences. Secondly, that they have formulated a value system which allows them to test the validity and appropriateness of the decisions they're going to take. Parents compensate for this in the natural way, very often in the home. But then many parents don't. They don't interact with their children in this way. If they're not getting it in the home, and they're not getting it through distance education, and they're not getting it in the school environment, they're being short changed. So the third problem we have to address is the question of interactive learning which equips our children for their lifelong learning in rural communities.

Future Directions For Research

Now the fourth thing that I said I wanted to talk about, was future directions in research. Recently, Mr Dawkins and Mr Kerin jointly announced a policy called A FAIR GO which is a new policy for improving rural education opportunities in Australia, particularly beyond the school level. I applaud those initiatives. But I, equally must observe that before they are widely implemented, we need to test the assumptions on which the decisions are based. We need to determine those critical areas in which the funds need to be applied and how they need to be applied. Those of us in education function most of the time because the situation occurs and we have to deal with it. We seldom stop to think whether we would deal with it in another way if we truly researched the problem. A great deal of research, in recent times, has been directed towards the problems of educating people in rural communities in educational opportunities, and so on. But it's all in isolated pigeon holes. The thing that is needed, and is needed urgently, is to bring all of this research together and say look when we look at it, what do we know, and what do we still need to know. And what are the priorities for discovering those pieces of information. I could give you two examples that we know little about, we pretend we do, but we know little about in the field of the education of Aborigines. Those who have worked with Aborigines daily will tell you they don't see the world with the same vision or view as we do. And that conditions how they respond to learning experiences. We must find out how Aborigines view the world, how do they get their images together. What factors influence the formation of them? We know that Aborigines don't learn in the same way as we do. What are their learning styles? and how can we adjust to those? We need to pursue research then that will address the questions of opportunity. I didn't come here intending to give you a list of research projects that should be undertaken. I hope that in the course of the discussion you might raise some of them. I want to highlight the fact that, in the future, we must give more care to researching a whole field of rural education, and to base our decisions and operations on that research.

Now the things I've suggested, looking at the problem of the education of girls in rural communities, looking at the problem of educating Aborigines, looking at the problem of interactive learning and of conducting research demands two things. First, commitment. Commitment by Australians - by me, by you - to pursue these things, and, of course, if you have commitment the next comes and that is that is requires resources. And resources in the end whether they are human or equipment come back to money: to train, to purchase equipment and so on. We have a very good track record in recent years of the government expenditure in all levels, both state and federal, on rural education. When you look at some of the technology that is around the corner or nearly here now that can be used in the delivery system of rural education and you look at the cost, you begin to say there's no way that the Nation can afford it. I want to put it to you there is no way the Nation can afford not to afford it. The rural sector of this country contributes more significantly than any other section of the economy to the welfare of this Nation. If we're going to keep people in our rural communities, if we're going to give them ... what we are on about: equality of opportunity and quality life, we have an obligation to find those resources.