

# EDUCATION AND CHANGE IN RURAL AREAS IN THE 1990'S - CHICKEN LITTLE WAS NOT WRONG

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## Abstract

The economic and social conditions of rural Victoria are changing. The concepts and practices that have supported the work of the Country Education Project (CEP) in rural Victoria have to change accordingly. The paper looks at the changes impacting upon rural Australia and examines in particular the subject of disadvantage. Disadvantage is a concept that in practice is drawn from a period of stability and relative affluence. Present circumstances may well require a different interpretation, one more in accord with lifelong educational principles. The policy development of the CEP is then analysed and challenges and issues for that organisation outlined.

## Introduction

This paper discusses the concepts of advantage and disadvantage in rural Victoria, considers the future of rural communities in the state given the immense forces affecting them, discusses the relationship of education with rural life, and suggests some future challenges for the Victorian Country Education Project (CEP).

## The Concepts of Disadvantage and Advantage

### **Disadvantage**

When the Commonwealth Schools Commission commenced the Disadvantaged Country Areas Program in 1977, the idea of disadvantage, *dis-advantage*, was based on an awareness of advantage, on the knowledge that some people and some places were able to participate more fruitfully in society than others. In the 1970's, the new Labor Government began to address the notion that there were those who had done well out of the post-war economic conditions and there were those who had not. The differences were quite obvious - and the answers to the problems seemed fairly apparent too.

Victoria, for instance, then had a healthy farm economy, manufacturing was doing well and service industries were beginning their upward spiral. There were still the cyclical downturns that every commodity-based economy has but, overall, they were relatively insignificant. Australia had a good idea of who and what was disadvantaged and a notion of how to set about reversing the fortunes of such people and places.

The CEP was one of those answers. By directly confronting the essence of disadvantage, by providing better access to education, by improving educational materials and curriculum, by enhancing the quality and relevance of educational delivery, by changing expectations of students, their families and their communities, people and areas could be brought to a point where they could share more equitably in educational excellence.

Despite the national emphasis on disadvantage, the Victorian CEP took a very positive approach. It identified the positive aspects of living in rural areas and drew up an inventory of the talents of

people and the resources available in country communities that could be harnessed to improve the educational processes in schools.

The CEP became a remarkable triumph of process, the application of a way of doing things much more than the actual success of projects themselves. Reports like the DORET Report (Delivery of Rural Education and Training) emphasise the processes that work best in rural areas and they are largely those that the CEP would claim as its own. These processes involve consulting with communities, letting people at the grass roots make the decisions, keeping bureaucracies at a respectable distance, giving untagged funding, and trusting people to do things their way.

### Advantage

But now the question might well be altered to ask: who is advantaged in country areas and regions, rather than who is disadvantaged? Who is better off in country Victoria now? Which people and groups within the rural Victorian scene can be classified as being in any way in a superior position to another? In some ways the answers are readily discernible, and still the same as they every were. People who have jobs are better off than those who do not have them. People who have access to reliable incomes can better provide for themselves than those resources are limited or unreliable. So where is the difference?

The difference depends on who can be slotted into those categories. Once it was farmers, business people, public servants. Who would it be now?

What is changing? Since the Second World War Australians have operated on a consensus of a stable society - one that has at its base a steady state or *status quo* notion of economics, politics and social matters. This was Donald Horne's view when he portrayed Australia as a lucky country. Australians were lucky. We had ample space, ample resources, ample markets. If things got tough then it was only a matter of tightening our belts, of hanging in through the hiccoughs of recessions such as in the late 1950s and 1980s and things would soon right themselves. The British, the Europeans, the Asians would get back soon enough to buying our wheat, taking up our wool stockpile, absorbing all our excess mineral resources. "She'll be right, mate. No worries?"

Moreover post-war Australian society appeared to share a common belief in equity and community. The prewar experience of depression coupled with the rigours of conflict combined to give Australians a commitment to each other, to the idea of a society in which the benefits of growth would be shared and all citizens given a 'fair go'.

Our educational, social, economic and industrial systems, the warp and weft of our lives, were interwoven with the understanding that commodity export would provide the base of the economy while manufacturing and service industries provided added wealth generation and sharing. Our education system produced the skills and the cultural capital to take up work in the system as we knew it, and social and political policy developments such as aged and welfare pensions would make sure that all Australians could participate in the process.

The disadvantaged were those who by the luck of the draw or unfortunate circumstances had not been able to access schooling or skills, or were not born into situations that favoured their ability to enter and share in the benefits of this world. Improving those circumstances and developing those skills would move people towards the good things of life. And that is what the CEP tried to do.

## A Future For Rural Communities

Unfortunately, the world has changed. Just when some people had got used to being on top of the ladder and some were getting near to scoring - the goalposts were moved. That playing field that Australians had come to understand and accept as a given is no longer there. Part of the reason for this is the internationalisation of the economy and the dramatic impact it has had on Australia.

Australian rural regions, provincial cities and towns still depend very heavily on the export of the wide range of primary products produced there. The agricultural and mining industries account for 80 per cent of Australia's commodity exports. This means that they are vulnerable to such products being produced more cheaply in other countries or to the setting of artificial prices. At a Melbourne conference of local economic development practitioners held in early 1991, *The Age* economic journalist, Kenneth Davidson, said that in response to the changing world agricultural market, over the next ten years 25 per cent of the mixed sheep/wheat farms in Victoria would be gone, and the farms that were left would have considerably reduced incomes.

All this impacts on the wellbeing of particular regions and communities in Australia. Table 1 shows two population snapshots of a rural community taken 15 years apart, in 1971 and 1986. The data is taken from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1971 and 1986 Census figures and includes a comparison figure for all Australia in 1986. The area is the Shire of Korong, which takes in a part of the old goldfields area of Victoria that includes Inglewood and Wedderburn where once the population numbered at least 100 000. But that was a century ago.

**TABLE 1**  
**POPULATION CHANGE IN RURAL COMMUNITY, 1971-86**

	SHIRE OF KORONG		AUSTRALIA
	1971 %	1986 %	1986 %
<u>Population</u>			
Up to 14 years (inclusive)	30	23	23
Up to 25 years (inclusive)	43	35	40
26 - 54 years	33	36	40
55 plus	24	29	20
<u>Employment</u>			
Unemployed Total	1	12	9
15 - 19 years		26	20
20 - 24 years		12	10
Agriculture, Forestry, Mining, Construction, Manufacture.		61	52
Retail, Transport, Communication, Financial and Business Services, Public Administration.		36	45
<u>Households</u>			
Up to \$12 000 income p.a.		43	21
Lone Person occupants	19	24	19

What appears self-evident is that the population of this rural community is getting older. It has a decreasing youth base and a smaller number of people in the most productive age grouping - the 25-55 year old sector. This community has a large imbalance of households with an income less than \$12 000 p.a. (1986) and a growing number of people living alone.

What ABS census data cannot describe is that there is a real problem of unemployment for the youth that still live there and great difficulty maintaining infrastructure and services, roads, bridges, shops, post offices, local government and schools, on the population and resource base that remains. Moreover, despite the difficulty of assessing the real worth of rural assets and income, the figures highlight the problematic issue of the rural poor. This group includes both those who have lived in country communities all their lives and those who have moved there to stretch the government and private pension payments they live on.

It seems apparent that in these circumstances it is going to get harder to sort out disadvantage, particularly by area. The economic support structure which has sustained Australia for so long now appears to have developed very shaky foundations and as yet we do not appear to have found the right way to deal with this. And with the collapse of economic certainty has come the demise of the post-war consensus that saw Australians committed to each other, to the right to a 'fair go', to equity and social justice.

In Australia it is becoming more familiar to see the disparities of affluence and poverty side by side. People seek handouts in Toorak. The unemployed sit idle in the streets of Hamilton while nominally affluent landowners ponder the serious question of whether or not they are going to survive the rural downturn if they cannot get income and they cannot sell their assets.

In meeting these issues, Australians cannot rely on the future to be a re-run of the past. For all of us to survive in the future, for those who really are needy to have a future that does not rely on charity, for those whose comfortable past may well be threatened by relative poverty in the future, we may well have to reconsider our views. This may have to include redirecting government funds in order to improve productivity so that there are funds to continue to provide the safety net that the citizens of a modern and humane state expect.

In the light of this hostile economic climate and the structural changes taking place around the world there will have to be some significant changes to education and training. It is obvious that the great majority of the rural workforce will have to be retrained to achieve new skills within traditional industries, and some will have to follow quite different vocational paths. It is also clear in the 1990s that education for children and youth in rural areas has to build on their capabilities, stimulate their ambitions and provide them with the widest possible scope for their future careers, whether they stay in rural areas or move to the city.

#### Government Involvement

All this change and potential for increased demand is occurring at a time of economic recession when the funds available to governments are decreasing and the capacity of the state to develop and augment programs in education is questionable. These changes have meant that governments are more demanding in terms of value for a dollar spent and in the tighter connectedness between money spent and government priorities.

## Education and Rural Life

There have been major changes to education generally in Victoria and around Australia. The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) has been introduced to make the final years of schooling less of a frantic roll of the dice for students, and more of an entry into a lifelong learning process that will equip young people for life as well as higher education. The VCE is not being received with universal enthusiasm, as always, change has its supporters and detractors. That the VCE is being received with exasperation by some librarians, already tired of the steady (but quiet) tramp of feet around their shelves, seems to be a wonderful affirmation of its success, at least in urban areas. There is still limited access to libraries in rural areas served by the CEP and the libraries do not always have access to the total range of materials for all students.

The government's policy of improving school retention has exceeded expectations. Schools have had difficulty in dealing with the increase in senior students. Tertiary institutions also lack the places to fit people, and worthy students are being denied the opportunity to go further.

Student retention in secondary schools in rural Australia is still less than that in metropolitan areas and that is a situation that needs correcting. Failure to do so may seriously disadvantage young people in these challenging times; but to act to improve retention in country areas will require the input of funds as the cost of enabling rural families and communities to improve retention will generally be significantly higher to those of metropolitan areas, especially in terms of forgone income, is significantly underestimated, because children in urban families are not required as often to contribute to family labour.

The Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, The Hon. John Dawkins, is accelerating the process of devising a national curriculum for schools; a task which at one time appeared intractable but is now becoming a distinct possibility.

What will all this mean for rural communities? Changes to the VCE in schools in Victoria should enable better, more positive response to the needs of the future, but it will not necessarily be a future in rural communities. For those people who might wish to see their children stay in their home areas, find productive employment opportunities and stay on to raise their own families, the VCE and its tertiary run-ons are not necessarily positive.

One of the goals of improving retention rates was to increase access to higher education, and that is working for many young people although there are still not enough places for them. It is a concern, however, other while retention rates are being raised there is a risk of making education as much a screening process as it ever was, by restricting access to tertiary and TAFE institutions to those who either are very talented or who can pay.

There is another element to this, however. The Australian tertiary enrolment pattern appears to be following that of the United States of America and the United Kingdom - that is, people are being encouraged into higher education. In Japan and Germany on the other hand, the move into higher education is accompanied by a far greater movement into the technical and vocational sector as well. This move into the more productive technical-vocational area of education is said to account in part for the economic success of those two countries, as opposed to places like Australia, the UK, the USA and Canada which put their own and their children's faith in the higher education sector.

A TAFE college director in rural Victoria was heard to say recently that he thought one of the problems for the future of TAFE would be to maintain connections with young people. The mean age for the students in his college in 1991 was 29 and this had increased over the last four years at an average of two years of age for each year. Quite a significant coterie of older age

apprentices was back in the learning setting as a part of restructuring in their particular industries. The director was reflecting, in part, on the fact that the push to secondary retention was causing younger students to bypass his college in favour of trying to access other tertiary education opportunities.

The move to higher education is not one that is likely to keep people in rural communities. Finding work after obtaining tertiary qualifications is more likely to occur in larger cities, although there is not a definite one-to-one correlation. The movement of people away from rural areas that begins when it becomes necessary to bus children large distances to high schools is reinforced further when many young people are forced to move away to take up tertiary studies. The assumption often is that education means moving away. Even the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training job and skill programs have the capacity to move people away as well.

Will the national curriculum of the future provide school students in rural areas with the skills that will enable them to stay on in rural communities, to find work or to make work as necessary? Perhaps. There are certainly positive curriculum experiments around which suggest that it is possible to achieve this. Will there be a lot of jobs available in rural communities to encourage them to stay around if they do not have the skills? There may well not be.

### Educational Context in Rural Communities

Success in secondary education in rural Australia means that those young people who attain it get a ticket to leave town for the bigger cities. At the same time the opportunity for unskilled work on farms and in local industries is dwindling. Therefore those who do not succeed in secondary education and choose to remain will struggle to find jobs they value, or any job for that matter. Those with low skill or educational levels, young or old, male or female, will find it increasingly hard to get work anywhere. Those who look like getting really stuck without jobs of course are young women, Koories, people with disabilities, those with low incomes, and older people.

Some of the communities of country Victoria look like coalescing into larger and larger towns leaving smaller communities to survive only if they have some special relationship to a particular industry or to another town. Beechworth and tourism is a good example of the former, the dormitory communities that feed into the bigger towns of the Latrobe Valley instance the latter. The withdrawal of government and private enterprise services back into the larger towns as part of the contraction of rural communities only increases this trend.

### The Message So Far

In summary, this paper has argued the following points.

- There are continuing changes to Australian society, particularly economic ones, and they will continue to impact on rural life.
- What is currently considered disadvantage may well have to change - it is unlikely to be accurate in the future.
- Lifelong learning is becoming a reality; men and women, young and old, rural and city people will need to keep learning or Australia's grasp on the handle of local and national economic survival will be very slippery.
- The principal themes of educational change will impact on rural communities.

- All this is happening in a time of constricting government funds, greater directional financing by way of responding to policy, and increasing competition within the sector overall for those monies that remain.
- The success of the processes by which the CEP has always done its work; that concentration on community process and consultation which has been its hallmark are needed in the future.

#### Disadvantaged Country Areas Program

Conclusions of a study of the national Disadvantaged Country Areas Program from 1977-1980 may still be relevant today (Randell, 1987). The study identified some of the major obstacles to the effective implementation of the Program over those first four years and they may still be major difficulties 10 years later. If they are they should be intelligently addressed.

Three reasons for the emergence of obstacles to program implementation in the 1970s were the Program's concept and operational demands, the nature and availability of resources and the need to share authority (Figure 1).

Obstacles relating to the concept of the Program and its operational demands included the failure to identify clear guidelines, the failure to identify clear boundaries, too little evaluation and research, limited access to clients and too little communication and publicity.

The nature and availability of resources became a problem because there was too little additional money available, personnel in rural areas were limited, the Program had limited attraction to personnel, there was too little flexibility in the use of funds, and too few staff of the kinds and quality needed.

The third set of obstacles arose in the Program because of the need to share authority. The major problems here were difficulty in sharing authority between State and area committees, among special interest groups, and between education departments and Program committees.

If the source of problems facing implementation of the CEP in 1991 can be identified, we may begin to work at what we might do to eliminate those we can do something about.

The second conclusion of the study is related to the policy-making process itself. In 1987, it was quite clear that the Program had undergone several changes as a result of the evolutionary and complex process of policy implementation (Figure 2).

The Schools Commission took three years to identify properly the extent of the problems of rural education before a policy was formulated in 1976 which led to the Program's beginning in 1977. As the policy was implemented, evaluated and reviewed over the next five years it led to the major change in 1982 which moved the Program out of the context of the Disadvantaged Schools Program to become the Country Areas Program in its own right. After another five year cycle there was an abortive attempt to change the nature of the Program to become the Rural Schools Development Program. In 1990 a further review was conducted and the initiative of providing funds for improving retention rates for secondary students in rural areas was launched. The amount of funds made available, \$3 million, is almost the same as the first legislated for the total program in 1977.

The changing nature of the policy-making process requires regular reflection on the nature and quality of practice, to evaluate what is being done, to change and improve practice as necessary and to keep doing those things that are being done well.

FAULT TREE ILLUSTRATING OBSTACLES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM

FIGURE 1

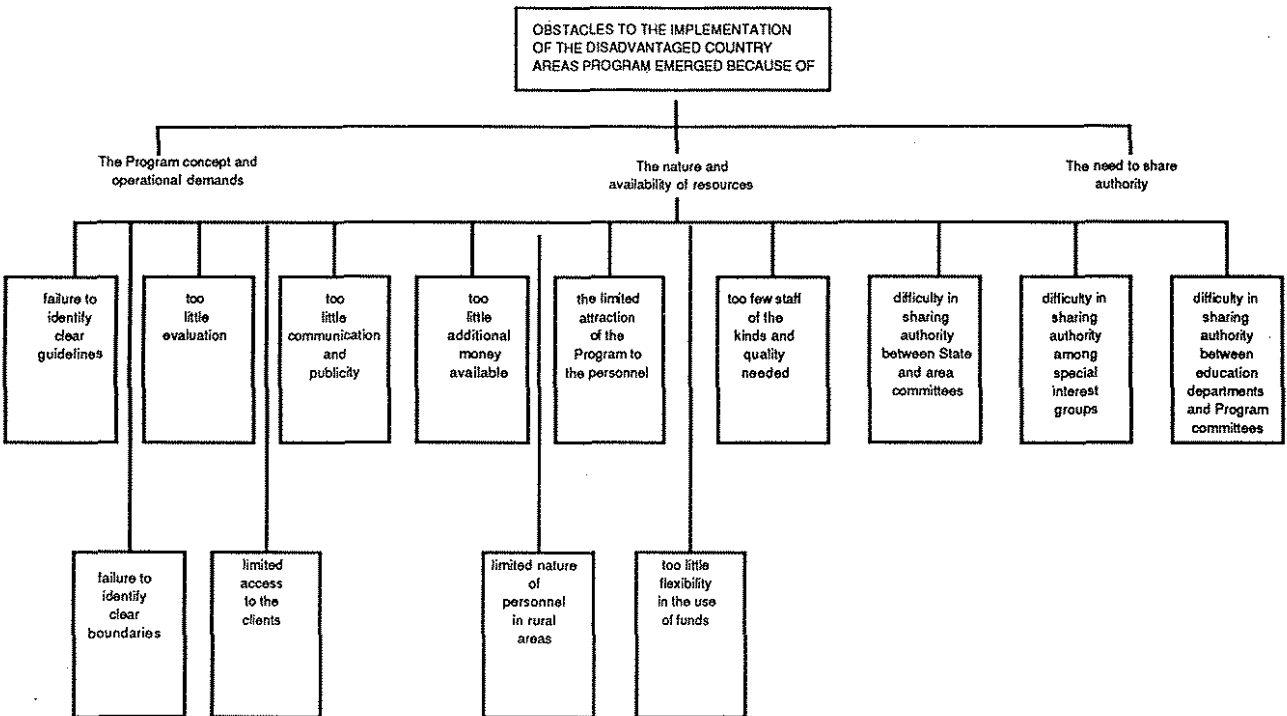
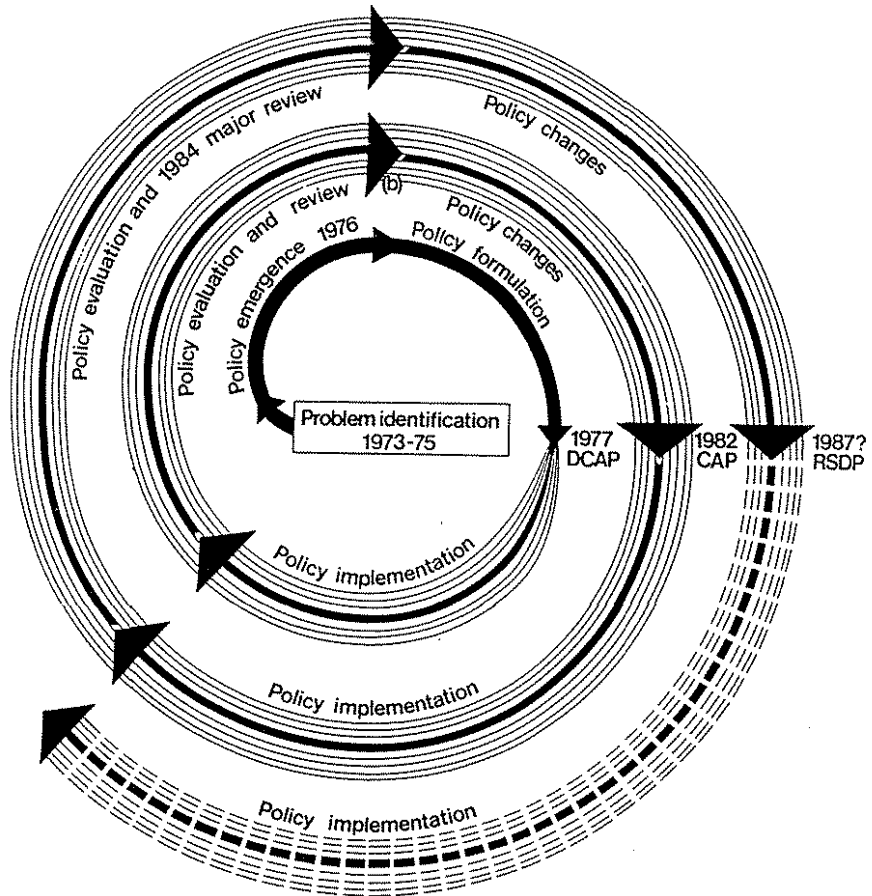




FIGURE 2

THE EVOLUTIONARY AND COMPLEX PROCESS OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM



— Commonwealth policy.  
— State policies.

(a) The Disadvantaged Country Areas Program (DCAP), 1977-1981 was renamed the Country Areas Program (CAP), 1982-1986 and the Commission recommended in 1986 that it be renamed the Rural Schooling Development Program (RSDP) in 1987.

(b) The Northern Territory participated in the Program from August 1980.

## Challenges For The CEP

In the spirit of reflecting on practice and evaluating options for the future, the following questions might be asked about the CEP in Victoria in 1991.

- Is it appropriate that the CEP continues to be confined to particular areas of the state that were originally considered to be geographically isolated and disadvantaged? The whole rural area of the state, according to some people, is in crisis. The question that could be asked is why should some areas benefit particularly from the processes and skills that groups such as the CEP have to offer and others not?
- On the other hand, Victoria has been frequently criticised for spreading funds too thinly over too broad an area. Is there a case for targetting funds on only the most disadvantaged areas, say the Mallee Trace and East Gippsland?
- Should areas be rotated out of the program after a few years participation, as they are in Tasmania?
- Or should the CEP start to work on the educational needs of particular groups of children and young people across the state who will suffer educational problems - for example, Koories and young women.
- Is it appropriate for funds legislated for primary and secondary students to be spent on rural adults needing learning opportunities when the program is specifically aimed at schools?
- Will the educational interest of the CEP continue to be for those students who are going to leave rural Victoria? What obligations does the CEP have to provide an education that is more appropriate to those who wish to stay?
- How will the CEP use its share of the additional funding promised in the Prime Minister's March 1991 Statement to increase the retention rate of rural students in secondary schools?
- How will the CEP deal with the implied challenge to its funding contained in the special Premiers' Conference discussions that suggested Commonwealth special purpose grants should be redirected towards the states with no strings attached?
- Can the CEP take a more collaborative position in working more closely in partnerships with other organisations in rural areas?
- Should the CEP take greater risks in creating a new vision which may require marketing to lift its profile?

There are obviously other questions about CEP that should be considered both in Victoria and across Australia.

The CEP has a great past and, importantly, a great future, full of challenges. In confronting this future, the CEP would do well to stay with the community education principles that have served this state so well to date in making difference to the education of children in the rural communities of Victoria.

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The Age.

This paper is developed from a keynote address given to the Victorian Country Education Project State Conference in May 1991.

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