

EDUCATING AUSTRALIAN CIRCUS CHILDREN: STRATEGIES TO REINVIGORATE RURAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The dominant discourse in most current literature about rurality emphasises Australian rural areas as marginalised communities constructed as 'deficit' in relation to urban areas. This paper explores the educational experiences of Australian travelling circus people, who regularly cross the boundaries between 'urban' and 'rural', as providing an alternative and more enabling understanding of rurality. The paper concludes by examining the implications of living and learning under the circus big top for devising strategies to reinvigorate education in rural Australia.

INTRODUCTION

There is a paradox evident in the place occupied by rural Australians in the national consciousness. On the one hand, they are the living descendants of the pioneers who figured so prominently in the writings of Henry Lawson and other colonial writers. On the other hand, they are increasingly marginalised from the 'main game' of the Australian economy, polity and society as the forces of globalisation become increasingly significant. Mules and Miller (1997) conveyed this paradox well when they argued that rural Australia acts out its own subservience:

Regional culture in Australia has always been caught in a contradiction; on one hand as the source of national identity and mythology through images of the bush and rural folklore; and on the other as a second rate copy of the metropolitan cultures of the cities. In many ways, regional Australia has had its culture assigned to it by the metropolis, as a function of its peripheral status. And in many ways, regional Australia contributes to its own form of subservience to the metropolitan centres (p. 1).

It is in the context of this paradox that the dynamic and innovative ways in which Australian circus people conceive and receive their education contradicts a current and pervasive stereotype affecting Australian rural education. This stereotype is the image of rural residents as automatically and irretrievably disadvantaged in comparison with their urban counterparts in relation to their educational provision. By contrast, the circus people's educational experiences exhibit both commonalities with and differences from the various groups that constitute 'rurality' in Australia, and reflect the operation of resistant and agential strategies of action. This suggests that a critical analysis of living and learning under the circus big top can help to promote a more dynamic and flexible approach to providing rural education.

These points are elaborated in the three sections of the paper:

- contemporary discourses about rurality
- empirical data about the educational experiences of people associated with four Australian circuses
- the implications of those experiences for reinvigorating education in rural Australia.

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CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES ABOUT RURALITY

In social justice terms, 'the centre' or 'the mainstream' is not considered an analytical category. Instead, 'the centre' or 'the mainstream' functions as the 'mythical norm' against which specific groups are judged to possess special needs or other characteristics that require particular kinds of policy decisions intended to increase their members' access to resources or quality of life (Haskell and Steer, 1995; Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997). These processes are inextricably linked to a differential valuing of different groups of people, with consequent marginalisation from resources and services such as education.

This analysis certainly applies to rurality. As Stehlik (1996) explained:

While many Australians would describe 'the bush' as the epitome of being Australian – most of them live on the eastern seaboard. Many of those who do choose to live in regional or rural Australia consider that urban Australians do not understand their concerns or their needs (p. 111).

These conceptual and empirical disparities between urban and rural Australians belie the point made by Cameron-Jackson (1995), that "the supposed rural/urban dialectic is actually diffuse" (p. 1), suggesting that the construction of rurality as 'other' to urbanism is as theoretically questionable as it is socially divisive.

Furthermore, the differential rate of access to resources between urban and rural Australia has widened as the impact of globalisation and privatisation is felt. The shift in thinking from the welfare state to 'user pays' has made the continued provision of many services to rural areas of Australia uneconomic when assessed according to economic rationalist criteria, in the context of a shrinking consumer base in contrast to expanding markets in more densely populated areas (Falk, 1997, pp. 15-16).

In terms of policy, a significant result of this situation has been that rurality has become seen as something of a disability, if not a terminal condition. Two examples may suffice to support this contention. Firstly, efforts to encourage beginning doctors to practise in rural areas are based on the unspoken assumption that such efforts are needed to attract medical practitioners to places where they would otherwise never think to visit, let alone reside. Secondly, the debate about Australian tariff levels is conducted in ways that emphasise the necessity of making a 'special case' for farmers who are already disadvantaged because they live away from heavily populated areas of Australia.

One particularly severe outcome of constructions of rurality as 'the other' is the impact of those constructions on young rural Australians. For example, Gidley and Wildman (1996) concluded their study of the educational and vocational aspirations of rural youth in this way:

In the current rural context of diminishing employment opportunities and increasing urbanisation of life-styles, many rural youth are creating their own meaning through the streets. They are able to voice their needs and interests only if the responsible adults will listen...Indeed it is our firm opinion that yet further enquiries will do little more than chart an ever growing litany of failure by policy developers to deliver effective policies (p. 17).

A resistant dissension from the marginalising impact of the dominant discourses of rurality was expressed by Helen Sheil (1996) in the context of her discussion of the establishment of the

Centre for Rural Communities in the Gippsland region of Victoria. Reacting against discourses in which "urban is the norm, and rural is defined as problematic" (p. 22), Sheil drew on gender as another signifier of marginalisation:

Just as women's experiences of life is different to men's, and therefore requires different structures, different processes and different language so too does rural experience differ from our urban counterparts. Rural is not mini urban. Experiences in rural communities are different. What is needed is different thinking, different structures, different processes and a sensitivity to the knowledge of place, people and their relationship to each other (p. 22).

For Sheil, the Centre for Rural Communities was intended to shift focus from rurality to deficit and problem to rurality as agency and opportunity. She envisaged that Centre as working "positively with the diversity of economies and lifestyles that comprise rural Australia" (1996, p. 29).

One crucial but often overlooked element of Sheil's "diversity of economies and lifestyles" making up rural Australia is the circuses whose visits are usually irregular but almost always memorable. We turn now to examine the educational experiences of Australian circus people, after which we argue that those experiences can be linked to an enabling, rather than a deficit, conception of education in rural Australia.

LIVING AND LEARNING UNDER THE CIRCUS BIG TOP

Occupational travellers such as itinerant circus and show people, seasonal fruit pickers and people working on trawling boats constitute a significant minority of the Australian population (Fields, 1997; Rahmani, 1985; Welch, 1987). Of that significant minority, circus people form a highly distinctive subset.

We refer in this section to four groups of circus people with whom we conducted several semi-structured interviews in 1998 in New South Wales and Queensland. We assert that these people challenge the stereotype that Australians are either urban or rural, and that rural residents suffer a 'deficit' in comparison with urban dwellers. Circus people's itineraries require them regularly to move in and out of 'urban' and 'rural' spaces. Unlike many Queensland show people (Danaher, 1998), the circus groups who took part in our research have their bases in metropolitan cities (see Danaher, in press for other similarities and differences between circus and show people). Their itineraries take them to different suburbs throughout the year, and in addition they travel to selected country towns outside the cities. Most interviewees answered "In my caravan" to the question "Where is home to you?", despite the fact that some of them own houses at particular places.

This point needs to be emphasised. For circus people, physical residence is far less important in signifying 'home' and identity than the fact of their being connected with 'the circus'. This connection immediately marks them as 'different' from people whose residence has always been fixed. So the difference of the circus people's itinerancy – which, despite their base in Australia's largest cities, makes them neither 'urban' nor 'rural' – is the source of considerable pride to them at the same time that it leads to marginalisation and exclusion from the 'mythical norm' of fixed location.

As with rural Australians' deviation from urbanism, the circus people's departure from permanent residence creates particular challenges for their educational provision. Their

itineraries are less fixed than those of show people, meaning that it is more difficult for them than for show people to avail themselves of the program of travelling teachers provided by the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher, 1998). Their frequent movement in and out of urban and rural areas results in circus children often combining attendance at one or more city schools with stints of correspondence education.

Yet this marginalisation from continuous educational provision is balanced, even outweighed, by the circus people's rich and varied educational experiences in their own territory. Aspiring lion tamers, clowns and trapeze artists learn their craft by observation and practice, with opportunities for individual innovation through variations on traditional acts. Current educational literature would depict these experiences as 'real life' and 'lifelong' learning. The point to emphasise is that the circus constitutes the core or the centre against which formal schooling is judged as being peripheral unless it makes a direct contribution to enhancing performances in the ring.

The centrality of the circus is evident in the themes underpinning the circus people's accounts of how they live and learn under the big top. One theme was the interviewees' perceptions of how they learn the circus acts that they perform. One participant commented, "The main thing in life is practice and...learning off other people". Another respondent stated that "you get taught by somebody that's already been in the business". Another person elaborated his understanding of this approach to learning:

...you learn a lot watching people. You'd be surprised at how much you learn by just listening to people and asking questions. Most of the acts I do aren't that difficult to learn over time,...as long as you have basic coordination and balance. Most of the acts I do are quite learnable....most of the acts that I do, almost any person off the street with basic skills could come and learn. It's just a matter of whether they're dedicated enough to [do so].

Two separate discourses underpin these statements. Firstly, there is the assumption that the acts performed in circuses – such as fire eating, juggling, knife throwing, lion taming and trapeze artistry – are distinctive features of circus performances. They help to differentiate such performances from other kinds of public entertainment. Secondly, there is the assumption that this specialised knowledge can be acquired through observation of others and constant practice. The reference to "almost any person off the street" being able to learn circus acts represents a strategy to evoke some kind of identification with non-circus people that disrupts constructions of these two groups as being both mutually exclusive and differentially valued.

A variation on explanations of learning circus acts was to extol the educational benefits of an itinerant lifestyle that can take one throughout rural Australia: One interviewee recounted some of the drawbacks of living in circuses, then he stated:

But also they can be immensely rewarding. One day, you know, you see the beauty of the Nullarbor Plains, the Great Australian Bight, the wildflowers of Western Australia or the magnificence of the Great Barrier Reef and all of the islands and things.

Again an interview statement was used to describe places and situations that are familiar to most Australians but that are experienced distinctively by circus people. We argue later in this paper that a similar strategy to this combination of familiarity and distinctiveness – of sameness and difference – could help to reinvigorate Australian rural education.

Another theme in our interviews with circus people was the variety of both their backgrounds before they entered the circus and their experiences once they had entered. Some people spoke with pride of belonging to fifth, sixth or seventh generations of circus people. One respondent stated that the circus has "been in my family for over a hundred years now", while another claimed, "...I've been involved in the circus my whole life. And [in terms of] family background, I think I am seventh generation." By contrast, a female dancer had joined the circus only three years previously at the suggestion of her dance teacher, and was the first member of her family to be connected with circuses. However, she did not see herself as being in the circus for life:

...because there is no way that I can do any other act other than the dancing or the magic. I just can't cope with heights, and I'm just not any good at it basically so no, no. I don't think there is much of a future for me in it.

These different backgrounds and experiences applied also to the circus people's roles, with individuals carrying out different combinations of tasks. This point indicates that the stereotypical 'circus performer' does not exist, but rather that the working lives of circus people reveal considerable diversity and heterogeneity. This in turn reinforces our argument that 'rurality' as a category (particularly when conceived as 'other' to urbanism) downplays the differences among residents of rural areas, while at the same time labelling those people as lacking agency and vitality and therefore as being marginalised and powerless.

This point was also reflected in an interviewee's comment on the changing relations between circus people and local people:

...there were many of them many, many years ago who came into town and they didn't pay their bills and they...change[d] their name down the road...But now...they don't have criminal records, and so on. So the public has accepted it. And also, now when you see the modern shows, in particular, the good shows have the same impact as the theatre...it's a big production. Obviously you're not playing at it. It's a serious business...and the attitude from the locals is vastly changed from what it was thirty or forty years ago.

Again this discourse emphasised simultaneously the internal dynamics among circus people (in this context, changing from one generation to the next) and the relationships between circus people and local people. Those relationships are much more than mutual economic dependence; they suggest also a desire for the recognition and valuing of aspects of both similarity and difference. In other words, the circus people's confident consciousness of what distinguishes them from others, as well as of what unites them with others, is central to the ways in which they live and learn under the big top. This consciousness underpins their construction of networks and relations with local people and people from other circuses. This consciousness also guides the circus people's incorporation of newly acquired knowledge into their existing epistemological frameworks.

This section of the paper has reported the ways that Australian circus people live and learn under the big top. We turn now to consider some of the implications of the circus people's experiences for rural education in this country.

REINVIGORATING AUSTRALIAN RURAL EDUCATION

The preceding analysis of Australian circus people's lifestyle and educational experiences revealed three key features:

- a heightened consciousness of themselves as they and others perceive them
- an awareness that their status as circus people brings distinctive benefits (such as opportunities to travel) and problems (such as access to educational provision)
- a capacity to deploy strategies to preserve their distinctive lifestyle and maximise their access to economic, educational and social resources.

This analysis emphasises the circus people's use of relationships with both circus and non-circus people to resist marginalisation and exercise agency. In this section of the paper, we propose to extrapolate from that analysis to suggest strategies for reinvigorating Australian rural education.

Firstly, the lifestyle and education of circus people point towards a more accurate and enabling depiction of the lives of rural people than analytical categories such as 'rurality', and their associated stereotypes, make possible. One of the key features of those experiences is diversity, in terms of both role performance and background in circus life. Researchers into Australian rural communities would do well to record the rich diversity of experiences and backgrounds exhibited by the members of those communities. After all, diversity and heterogeneity are the most powerful antidote to the homogenising and marginalising stereotypes that construct Australian country towns as 'all the same'.

Secondly, it is important that rural educators and researchers emphasise that the corollary of recognising the diversity and heterogeneity of circus people is the focus of attention on 'difference', not simply as a sociological phenomenon, but also as a powerful political statement. By this we mean that valuing the difference of particular groups includes a conscious recognition that such groups demand, and warrant, an equitable proportion of resources and services – including educational provision. This, of course, lies at the heart of the paradox outlined at the beginning of this paper: that rural communities as an ideal are highly valued in the Australian national imagination, while real life members of those communities are routinely denied their fair share of the fruits of that imagination.

Thirdly, circus people's status as neither 'rural' nor 'urban', and their complex networks of relationships with local and other circus people, reinforce the effectiveness of those networks in challenging stereotypes and contributing to productive social change. The strategy of forming strategic alliances is not a new one for rural Australians, but it does bear reinforcement with a demonstration of the operation of those alliances among circus communities. Just as rural people have to lobby politicians and government officials in relation to farm subsidies, tariffs and the provision of essential services in towns with declining populations, so circus people have to negotiate with local authorities to allow their performances to take place.

We argue, therefore, that a reinvigorated Australian rural education is likely to result from two simultaneous processes: a constant and consistent resistance of marginalising discourses of 'rurality'; and the enactment of strategies to celebrate the positive dimensions of what makes rural communities 'different', while at the same time emphasising that the similarities between rural people and other Australians justifies their demand for equitable access to educational provision. These two processes are also evident among the circus people, which indicates that their educational experiences have a significance that extends well beyond the confines of the big top.

CONCLUSION

According to Oliver and Lake (1996):

One of the most consistent themes evident in the literature dealing with rural education is that of rural disadvantage. Of the matrix of factors leading to that disadvantage, geographical isolation and the extent to which it restricts access, is a major concern. (p. 1)

This paper has analysed this "rural disadvantage" in terms of the 'rurality' analytical category, which we argued derives from a stereotypical deviation from the 'mythical norm' of permanent residence, and which thereby perpetuates the marginalisation of the groups included in its ambit. The paper referred to four circus groups, whose members are neither 'urban' nor 'rural' and whose lifestyle and educational experiences draw attention to both their similarities to, and their differences from, other Australians. Thus rurality is not a static concept for these occupational travellers. Rather, it is dynamic, fluid and constantly evolving.

The paper concluded by reiterating some of the negative repercussions of the 'rurality' analytical category, specifically for educational provision, and by suggesting certain strategies for reinvigorating Australian rural education extrapolated from the actions and experiences of circus people. Clearly such strategies are urgently needed if the promise of rural residence outlined by Sheil (1996), rather than the emphasis on rural disadvantage highlighted by Oliver and Lake (1996), are to characterise future rural education in this country. A reinvigorated rural education would be a positive, if unintentional, outcome of living and learning under the circus big top.

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