



INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN THE COUNTRY: QUESTIONS OF EQUITY ARISING FROM DOWNSIZING AND RESTRUCTURING¹

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Australia has long been of interest for its attention to educational equity by the relative quality of its state based provision of schooling in a country with a similar landmass to the 48 mainland states of the USA but a population of only 18 million. The six states and two territories had organised centralised systems of schooling which managed to ensure qualified teachers, facilities, policy frameworks and curriculum guidelines have been made available to almost all students. Even in remote and isolated settings, country hostels or distance education courses enabled most students (other than Aboriginal) to participate in terms of relative equality in forms of 'mainstream' schooling. However, in the current economic conditions, 'read' by the Australian government, and supported by most of the world's economic infrastructure such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the typical response to a shrinking tax basis has been to reduce government spending on education and other human services. This reduction of expenditure has been experienced in quite uneven ways, both between different states and across different locations and demographics of any particular state school system. Rural and remote schools, in particular, have been little studied in relationship to policies of devolution of certain powers and responsibilities, restructuring of curriculum and support services and in particular policies of restructuring and downsizing under which different forms of what might be called 'educational infrastructure' have been removed. The relative equality of provision across the country has been eroded, sometimes significantly.

In this paper, the particular role of 'educational infrastructure' in rural areas is explored, with particular emphasis on what occurs for teacher professionalism as a consequence of this erosion of centralised provision. Most professional activities have been strongly reliant on different forms of infrastructure - largely invisible and taken for granted until it has been removed. Infrastructure includes, in this instance, education department provision of in-service activities, curriculum development consultation and support services such as educational advisors. While it is true that certain monies have been transferred to local school sites for the purposes of professional development for staff and school communities, the effect of the standardised budget system and the lack of attention to rural and regional issues, it is argued, suggest that new forms of inequality and discrimination within state education systems are emerging.

In the sections which follow, I provide an example of the ways in which globalising economic processes are differentially realised within a nation state's educational provision. In particular, I point to the continuing role of space and physical distance in the educational provision and the consequences for teachers' professional development and activist potentials if this continues to be ignored in educational policies and funding

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mechanisms. The combination of cost-cutting and policies favouring localism in educational decision making have seen the dismantling of education's systemic infrastructure without an adequate replacement, with specific consequences for those in rural areas.

The lived problem of distance in an era of globalisation

The nation state has been constantly produced by practices which rely on infrastructures largely built on specific temporal and spatial relations, particularly in relation to the development of infrastructure, a process still continuing in, for example, the provision of phone and television access across the vast distances of the continent of Australia. Schooling in particular has been central to the construction of the nation state, in terms of producing both citizens and workers (Giddens, 1990; Popkewitz, 1996); the infrastructure of schooling has thus tended to be a jealously guarded domain by the state. The location of schools in local neighbourhoods in cities and in small towns and cities across the country has been supported over the past hundred and fifty years of so by the burgeoning structure of State Education Departments. Thus a central approach of the development of the modern nation state was precisely the recognition of the role of physical space in terms of access and opportunities. For state intervention through policy and direct service provision to be successful, in rural and remote areas in particular, access needed to be local and provision almost universal. Schools have been a visible and tangible demonstration of building 'our' country and its citizens.

As governments in countries such as Australia experience a shrinking tax base when businesses move beyond the shores of their nation, there has been increased focus on downsizing of public provision, and privatisation has become essential if certain services are to continue. (See Kenway and Epstein, 1996). Such shifts in the public sector have necessarily focussed on education which continues to take approximately a quarter of the (reduced) state budgets. 'Decentralisation' as a policy has exported certain responsibilities to local levels, especially management and accountability activities, while setting benchmarks, standards, testing, curriculum, reporting and accountability frameworks have all been recentralised. The paradox of devolution of school management is that the scope of the decision-making and its framing mainly occur in quite a narrow range of centrally set parameters. Schools and other educational settings can now organise their own marketing (Kenway et al., 1993), set priorities for professional development within state-wide priorities, manage their budgets, work out cost cutting measures and downsizing (Blackmore, 1997) and choose their service agencies. The 'steering at a distance' (Kickert, 1991) of the central employing authority is quite tightly coupled in the sense that the accountability measures are standardised and tied also to the performance appraisal of the principal whose job is thus to ensure that central regulations are carried out and reported upon.

In attempting to understand such shifts, in their complexity and speed, numerous analysts have turned in part to explanations of globalisation. Globalisation of the economy - and its links to changes in culture, politics, the growth of ethnicity and informational technology (Appadurai, 1990) - seems to be a useful starting place to understand what is at stake in more local state-based policy shifts. In particular, the literatures loosely coming together around this concept of 'globalisation' seem to promise a rich resource with which those in rural and regional settings might engage to

understand better and re-theorise their shifting positionings, our connections to other parts of the world and the changes we see and/or experience.

To a certain extent these resources are helpful in pointing to broad scale 'flows' and issues which shape new directions of public, political and economic policies. Key features of much globalisation literature emphasise - whether negatively or positively - shifts in the economy to a supra-national domination, the changing role of the nation-state, the growth of information and a knowledge economy based around new information technologies (Carnoy et al., 1994; Gibbons et al., 1994; Giddens, 1990).

However, globalisation literatures remain relatively silent about rural matters. Even the term 'regional' has been re-appropriated to refer to larger economic blocks (such as the 'Asian region') rather than its earlier meanings which largely referred to internal physical-geographic or economic areas, often 'hinterlands' supporting a city. Central Queensland has been accustomed to considering itself a 'region' but is now probably only a speck on the 'Pacific Rim'. Most of the discussion in the literature is explicitly metropolitan in focus or is concerned with much larger scale areas or processes. The 'rural' remains relatively invisible and residualised. Where it is noted, the promise of new technologies is seen to be an adequate means to redress any current and future perceived disadvantages. New technologies are mobilised, in governmental discourses, to suggest that they will delete the effects of space or distance for all, ushering in a new era of speedy connection to people and services.

Zygmunt Bauman, in a recent article entitled 'Time and Class' suggested that 'the last quarter of the current century will go down in history as the Great War of Independence from Space' (1998, p.70). In such a 'post-space-war-world, mobility has become the most powerful and most coveted stratification factor' in society (p.71). The question for many sectors is the nature of the consequences for those not on the winning side of this 'war'. Mobility is coveted precisely because it is not universal. The effects of the development of this new norm of mobility polarise the world in new forms of inequality. Bauman (1998, p.77) goes on to argue:

For those who remain 'separated by physical obstacles and temporal distances' such separation is more merciless and has more profound psychological effects than ever before..... Rather than homogenising the human condition, then, the technological annulment of temporal/spatial distances tends to polarise it.

Capital and government infrastructure have become exceedingly mobile in recent years. By moving away from rural and regional areas, capital and government have the capacity to 'disconnect power from obligations', their freedom from the reciprocal duty of those who are present to 'contribute to daily life, and to the perpetuation of the community' (Bauman, 1998, p.71). Global capital generally is characterised by its invisibility, by its speed of movement, especially through electronic technologies and its capacity to disengage with any specified location. (Witness the wholesale movement of labour intensive industries from one country to another as labour is cheaper elsewhere.) 'For global capital and, indeed, for governments, there is [n]o need to engage if avoidance will do' (Bauman, 1998, p.71).

Bauman's point is particularly important to understand in the recent context of Australian moves to decentralise and downsize public sector services. People who live in regional areas of Australia are often not highly mobile, particularly the long term

residents. When they do move, it is usually because they are economically downwardly mobile. There are also important groups of transient workers, for particular projects (mining, construction, or railway for example) or for seasonal industries such as shearing, fruit picking, or cane cutting. In a number of cases, families have not migrated with the worker, since projects such as mines have tended to be shorter term, or in locations which are expensive for daily living requirements, for moving expenses, or for children's schooling. Some of these transient workers are the stuff of Australian mythology (the drovers, the shearers, or fruit pickers, for example) while others are new occupational transients.

With restructuring of the public sector, there has been a significant decrease in the number and range of services offered in regional Australia. Those living in rural locations, whether short or long term, usually have no recourse to other services. Nor is there an easy way of challenging the removal of these services, seen as necessary to 'balance the economy'. Thus government is removed from face-to-face obligation for provision of services - they can avoid their constituents by the simple expedient of removing their offices from easy access. Devolution can thus be seen as a way of exporting the crisis away from central government to local levels (Watkins, 1993), with consequences for considerations of equity which had been the responsibility of a more centralised welfare state in larger numbers of western countries.

Continuing to provide rural schooling in a downsized context

Unlike some other services in these restructuring times, schools are still expected to operate in rural areas of the state. Provision of facilities for schooling - a school building, budget for materials and teachers - continues to be treated as part of a state's education responsibilities, although the capacity for capital expenditure on new buildings in demographic growth areas and maintenance of older stock remains problematic. There has been amalgamation and closure of significant numbers of smaller schools, in the cities and especially in country areas. There are now less than half the number of schools in Victoria than there was in the early 1980s, for example. Some of this can be explained by demographic shifts, some by increases in class sizes and in school sizes of the remaining schools. Multi-campus schools have become a 'normal' option.

Finding professional groups such as teachers to stay in rural and remote areas continues to pose a problem for state education, as well as for medical and other agencies. Colin Boylan carefully unpicked the stereotype of rural schools, which he noted were characterised as schools that:

- were inferior and lacking in the range of facilities;
- had high staff turnover;
- suffered from a lack of continuity in the curriculum;
- were staffed by young, beginning and often inexperienced teachers;
- have staff who did not conform to the local socio-cultural ethos;
- offered a restricted curriculum, especially to secondary students;
- were staffed by teachers who accepted the appointment because:
 - i. there were no other appointments available; or
 - ii. it was regarded as a quick step up onto the promotional ladder in Australian schools (Boylan in Boylan & McSwann, 1998, p.50).

A long staying teacher in Boylan and McSwann's study was one who had been teaching continuously for six years at their current school and was not planning a move in the next year. 'Long-staying rural teachers indicated quality of lifestyle, career satisfaction, community integration and participation, personal, family and environmental considerations as determinants for their decision to remain' (1998, p.62). In one territory of Australia there is a turnover of almost fifty percent of teachers each year, suggesting that those who stay do manage to find these characteristics of community and lifestyle appealing but that these are the minority of teachers.

The issues associated with isolation continue to be significant factors in recruitment and support of quality educational services of teachers in rural and remote settings. These include distance from family and friends, or from preferred geographic terrain (coast, hills, desert, for example), and access to many amenities seen as desirable (shopping or food) and professional networks such as in-service education and training, further study opportunities, resources, teaching materials and the like. Young teachers are often those who are expected to move to rural areas, often at a time when they are seeking a life partner, or to become independent. In Australia, every education department employing authority, except the compact Australian Capital Territory, faces the employment problems of recruitment for country areas or transfer to more desirable areas every year. As a result education quality in more remote or less desirable settings tends to be variable and there is often discontinuity in teaching staff. (Of course, any number of staff who stay only short times are excellent teachers, leaving an important legacy with the children and communities they have served. However, the continuity of education tends to reside in such situations in the community and not with the professionals.)

As a result, students in rural and remote settings are at a significant disadvantage in terms of the quality of their education. Retention of rural students into tertiary education has dropped from 25% in 1989 to 16% in 1997; smaller schools have been closed down, requiring more bus travel to schools further from home for numbers of students, and experienced teachers are rarely appointed or retained. Rurality is a growing focus of concern for increases in poverty, youth suicide and depression rates. Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000) is conducting an inquiry into education in rural and remote areas of Australia as a matter of human rights significance. Thus, although schools may continue to be provided in rural areas, the provision of the necessary infrastructure to ensure quality of provision has been significantly eroded, particularly in the past decade.

Supporting rural schooling with professional infrastructure?

In the field of education in Australia, sheer distance from one school to the next, or from school to support staff has previously been recognised by a range of measures. These have included remoteness allowances, the provision of travel budgets for a large number of curriculum advisors and consultants, a visiting teacher service for those with disabilities, the location of reasonably sized regional and district sub-offices of the Education Department across the state, and provision of state-wide services with teacher relief days, such as professional development, implementation training, and distance education materials and support structures. The existence of these services recognised that if a school was located in a relatively isolated setting, the 'equality of provision' concept underpinning public education implied that relatively accessible infrastructural services would have to be maintained. This was never completely successful, with

policy stronger than actual presence of the full range of services. However, the provision and location of professional development activities and curriculum consultants, for example, across a large state was seen as 'normal'.

In the context of state financial stringency, restructures of the education departments have largely been funded by reductions in spending on the infrastructure. Thus, there are no longer large curriculum branches, planning and policy divisions which developed expertise and conducted or sponsored research; curriculum advisors - except in areas of short term government priority - are a service of the past; and travel budgets for personnel to visit schools across the state have largely disappeared. Professional development has been outsourced - often to those same curriculum experts who have taken 'voluntary' redundancy packages from education departments and established themselves as private 'consultants'. After twenty or, in some states, thirty years of a less centralised emphasis - including for example, school-based curriculum development, the promotion of local and regional innovations which might be brought into state-wide prominence - the centre-periphery, top-down model of school change has been successfully restored, despite the well-documented problems with this approach (Sarasen, 1991).

The forms of infrastructure which supported the work of schools and was accessible to teachers has almost disappeared. The network of staff who visited schools were in the past able to identify emerging issues and put them on departmental action priorities - before they reached crisis point, for example. They were able to suggest teachers and principals in other schools working on similar issues and create opportunities for them to interact through specifically tailored professional development. Now there is almost no paid teacher release or professional development in work time. Where this exists it is largely tailored for the principal alone, who takes on a 'train the trainer' role in the latest initiative or priority. While professional development is included in the school's budget, this is not differentiated to allow for time and distance involved for some schools to be able to attend. In one country school I visited, the nearest plane is two hours' drive away; it costs approximately \$1000 to bring in a metropolitan keynote speaker in airfares alone and this uses up almost the whole annual budget. There is no additional travel budget or teacher time release for country schools compared to city counterparts, yet a country teacher cannot attend professional development without such funding. The effect on the teacher population is greater isolation and a growing unpopularity of country locations. It is much harder to talk to other teachers, let alone to engage in joint activity such as action research or curriculum development.

New technology, flexible organisations and the development of 'niche markets' are the policy initiatives which are expected to drive and replace old infrastructural forms and practices. Of these three future directions, the most relevant to those in more remote settings is the new role of technology in reducing the effect of space/distance. Rural schools, with the infusion of new technology, are to be able to 'talk' to other schools, to receive faxes and policy documents without interruption by flood or breakdowns or the time taken by traditional postal services. New technology is also supposed to overcome the problem of lack of teachers of specialist curriculum areas such as languages or in-service of teachers. Schools across the state of Queensland are networked on a department-specific state-wide network. There is a web site for professional development, although most of the listings (many of which appeared not to be consulted often by schools) are clearly metropolitan in origin and costing. Memoranda and policies are now available on line to all schools.

Yet the widely lauded use of technology is differentially experienced in rural areas. Often, there is no accessible service centre. Phone lines, on which the technologies depend, are even in this era found to be unreliable as a standard way of operating. The phone line in one part of a major provincial city in Queensland regularly went down each afternoon, making it difficult to receive faxes from head office, let alone connect to the Internet. More remote areas have even greater problems. The quality of some lines is so poor, they cannot support the transmission of data, making student access a nightmare for teachers trying to meet departmental priorities for computer literacy. Regular natural changes such as floods and drought periods also affect the quality of the lines, and the service to repair them is often slow in country areas. The technical officers and service repair personnel for the computers (usually outsourced) require a travelling fee to attend and even then may not be available to keep the service working. This is not comparable to the experience in metropolitan areas where there is a range of potential service agents. In addition, long distance phone calls during the day, when schools operate, are prohibitively expensive for many schools and teachers, when even to find a server is a long distance call.

Furthermore, while schools have been provided with new information technology for school office purposes, and software enabling standardised accountability, and in some cases for classrooms, they have also been required to perform many functions which were previously the province of the no-longer existing central and regional offices. Indeed, expenditure on computers and technologies is a widely trumpeted 'reform' as the contribution of states to modernising schools. The cost to education departments is huge, given current budgets and the costs of computers and their infrastructure. So far, the dollars spent are out of all proportion to the outcomes, especially in rural areas.

The provision of technology does not, however, replace the important interaction with peers which lies at the heart of professional growth. While many teachers may well find that they can find curriculum resources, or engage in on-line debates with peers, those in rural areas are not usually so well served. When there are few peers to contact directly, the time spent on finding crucial resources or how to use new forms of the technology may not result in the kinds of interaction desired. Weir's study of rural principals' professional development needs has documented the importance of managing to keep abreast of technological developments, but also the need to balance this with a range of personal contact on topics of the participants' own choice (Weir, 1998).

Many teachers express the need for professional development that is accessible in terms of both time and cost: they want access to their professional peers. For many women, especially those in teaching principalships, the contact with others in similar positions is reported as crucial to their continuing in their position. In Queensland, where only 21% of principal positions are held by women, and the majority of those are in teaching principalship, the task of finding a replacement teacher for themselves, plus the time to get to and from meetings, might have the consequence that fewer women will stay in those positions. Those with whom I discussed this said that they did not attend as often as they felt was necessary and that the range of support staff, other than for administrative purposes was not adequate.

The consequences of changes to infrastructure were not immediately apparent to education departments and their school staff, although they could easily have been

predicted. As education departments rely more and more on technologies to replace previous forms of interaction, communication, information, professional development and training, those without ready access to maintenance, service or training will be significantly disadvantaged. In addition, however, reliance on technology does not provide an adequate range of professional connections, although in future this may expand, as machines and people improve their interaction and educational designers expand their influence. Nevertheless, people-people contacts remain an important and necessary touchstone for the development of educational conversations, ethical awareness and the generation of support. The kinds of emotional labour associated with restructuring (Blackmore, 1997), often performed by women, continues to be ignored and underestimated as a feature of professional activity.

Conclusion

This paper has been written at a particular time and place: it reflects experience in a regional university, with research conducted in schools and centres across that region. Given the pace of technological development and cost, a number of the criticisms made here may soon be out of date. The deleterious effects of downsizing and devolution policies on those associated with schools in rural and regional areas have not occurred through deliberate discrimination. Rather, the effects arise largely because of two factors: 1) a press towards homogeneity through the mandating of standardised curriculum and other policies and 2) an assumed universal metro-centricity inherent in much of the policy and legislation. The reform of both curriculum and school governance have been the subject of enormous efforts by state governments in Australia. Their policies have attempted to standardise practices across schools, particularly in providing centralised curriculum and devolved management responsibility, to be policed through standardised accountability measures. However, most of the policies remain metropolitan-centric: that is they assume a universal school as the norm, and this school is a city-based one. As a result, rural and regional schools remain invisible or are treated only as exceptions to the norm. Rural education is only seen as the concern of those who are directly affected, a sizeable, but still only a small percentage of the population of schools, always treated as 'other' to the mainstream of metropolitan schools.

Since the policies may not easily fit local circumstances - for example, the numbers of people and the kind of operations of the school council, or the range of curriculum offerings - rural schools have often had to treat themselves as exceptions to the rule. Rural schools' relative invisibility - in the policies as well as in distance from head office - often means that innovation has to occur by necessity. Their invisibility in such circumstances can give them a relatively safe space for innovation, in which the invitation to invent has consistently been taken up in exciting ways. However, I also want to suggest that the 'space' for innovation has become much narrower in recent years, as accountability measures have been standardised. While some schools are enjoying their relative freedom from standardised budget measures, and their consequent capacity to set directions and priorities, others are finding that there is not enough to replace the services previously provided and that the standardised accountability systems seriously erode their efforts to differentiate their planning.

New forms of inequality are emerging, in which access to technology is a shorthand way of locating a series of gaps in infrastructure for communication and educational

community. There are a number of ways in which positive discrimination in favour of small and rural schools might be built in to the current system although that would require central budget and policy intervention. Politically, however, this might be more forthcoming in those states with larger regional areas such as Queensland and Western Australia, in which case the other states may begin to understand how to provide more adequate services.

However, we do need to consider what kinds of infrastructure are essential for the support of educational workers even if technologically-rich infrastructure were able to be universally available. Infrastructure in this paper has been seen to be those activities and resources which made the existing structure work, including physical, communication, political and professional dimensions. Infrastructure is a complex web of support, largely taken for granted or invisible until it is removed. Staff in schools are only now beginning to understand the costs of the removal of regional and central money and services. With the changed structures of the various education departments, there have not yet been adequate re-organisations and replacements of infrastructure to meet the changed circumstances. Given the fiscal basis of the Australian federal and state systems, this is unlikely to change in the interim.

Infrastructure which supports teacher innovation, quality and professional interaction is largely not going to come through hardware and computer software, although this is increasing. We need to note the different kinds of professional expertise and expectations that derive from the changes to structures, funding and policies for education. Clearly market professionalism (Preston, 1994) is being sought, but this is not so easily achieved in rural areas where there is often little competition. The problems in these locations are not ones of competition or niche marketing but of how to sustain a quality education when the dominant approach is irrelevant to the local school. Different forms of professionalism (Brennan, 1996) will develop - are already developing - as teachers engage in educative professional interaction with students, their communities and other teachers. However, the support for innovation and professional interaction is precisely what is not supported in the current climate. The equity considerations for teachers in regional areas, their students and the regions as a whole need documentation and wider discussion. We need to monitor closely the kinds of support that teachers and their communities find helpful, and to document the strategies undertaken to provide - perhaps home-grown - infrastructure.

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