



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## What Does a Quality Education Look Like in Rural Schools?

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### Abstract

This issue of the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education features articles that describe and critically analyse rural education, the common thread being 'What Does a Quality Education Look Like in Rural Schools?'. The education settings discussed include Australia, Czechia, Iraq, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, and the United States. The studies presented reflect the huge diversity of rural schooling and the many factors that work to support quality education. What does quality rural education look like? It looks like teachers who have a strong connection to place, with strategies for teaching that connect with students from the place. It looks like teachers who are flexible and open to learning. It looks like a supportive system. It looks attractive to parents. It looks like contextualised learning. It looks like parents and communities engaged in their children's learning at school. It is potentially transformative. It looks like a workforce that has good access to professional learning options. It looks like good governance, with local Elders and community leaders involved and driving a vision for education. It looks like strong peer relationships, and a culturally safe learning environment. It *does not* necessarily look like the narrowly defined metrics that are often used to define success or the deficits that are too often described in association with rural education.

Keywords: quality education, rural schools, rural education, contextually responsive education, school-community partnerships, transformative education

### Editorial

There is a school of thought suggesting that a quality education is all about performance and outcomes, which then lead to economic benefits (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). Quality, in this view of education: “*has to do with matters of effectiveness and efficiency*” (Biesta, 2023, p. 150)—It is measurable and competitive. Education then is a technical operation that produces graduates who have economic worth. Biesta points out that within a neoliberal hegemony “*many seem to think that questions about quality, about what good education is, can be resolved by technical means, such as in the ongoing obsession with generating evidence about what apparently ‘works’*” (Biesta, 2023, p. 150). And while educational achievement is important, as the articles in this issue of the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education show, there are so many other considerations that all contribute to a quality education in rural schools.

## **Preservice Teacher Experiences**

The article by Alison Willis and Sharon Louth tackles perhaps the most entrenched problem in rural education: the staffing of rural schools (Boylan, 2010; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023; White, 2008). The authors share some of their findings from an ethnographic case study of recent University of the Sunshine Coast. In this paper, they used a survey to investigate the cultural, social, and professional experiences of new teachers in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) schools. Participants provided advice to future RRR teachers which Willis and Louth developed into a model for pre-determinations for pre-service teachers considering and preparing for RRR schools. This model for “*surviving and thriving in RRR teaching locations*” encourages pre-service teachers to consider their social, geographical, emotional, personal, and cultural contexts. Willis and Louth’s work resonates with scholarly work that points to the need for beginning teachers to be prepared not just to be ‘classroom-ready’ but also ‘community-ready’ (see White & Kline, 2012). They also highlight the positive outlook of the participants about their RRR teaching, which is encouraging in the current nation-wide teacher shortage.

## **Context**

Robyn Henderson and Sazan Mandalawi dive into the disconnect between the PISA’s (Programme for International Student Assessment) representations of education and their own experiences ‘on the ground’ as rural education researchers. Using semi-structured interviews and observations, they created and analysed three case study narratives about education in a girls’ refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a remote school in western Queensland Australia, and the Migrant Education Program in rural Illinois. They identified four pillars of quality education in these rural places: context relevance, educators’ openness to learning, flexibility of teaching/learning approaches, and responsiveness to learners’ needs. The educators’ focus on the local context—teaching students in their own contexts while preparing them for possible future contexts—was at odds with the images of more global education presented by the Organisation for Economic and Community Development (OECD). Quality education was something different in each location and educators tailored their pedagogies to suit their students’ needs, not the placeless priorities of PISA.

## **Transformative Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Blandina Daniel Mazzuki and Sarah Vicent Chiwamba explored the role of initial teacher education in promoting transformative curriculum and pedagogy to counter the strong deficit views on rural education in Tanzania. They argue that in order to improve rural education, a more positive and tailored curriculum is needed in teacher education before the benefits can flow onto schools. Through semi-structured interviews with teacher educators and focus groups with preservice teachers, they found that under the current system, both teacher educators and preservice teachers considered it the government’s role, not theirs, to improve the quality of rural education. The authors draw on a robust, international body of literature to unpack their findings and to propose ways that work within their education system to improve the quality of rural education to the benefit of students.

## **School Attractiveness**

Dominik Dvořák, Silvie Rita Kučerová, Ladislav Zilcher and Zdeněk Svoboda explore the concept of ‘community’ and ‘magnet’ schools, in their article about attractive rural schools in Czechia. These two types mirror the potentially competing demands of schools to be both financially viable and provide a quality education that meets community expectations. The findings of the research point to the potentially negative effects of ‘school choice’, which on the one hand may benefit parents and students, but which disadvantage ‘community’ schools that rely on enrolments (and therefore funding) from ‘catchment zones’. In the Czech context, there are no publicly available school-level performance results, so parents make choices based on their

perception of what a ‘good school’ looks like. This then may lead school governance bodies and leaders to focus on school image rather than quality of teaching and learning.

Czechia is a relatively small country, and distances between rural communities and schools are not as great as they might be in more sparsely populated rural areas of other countries where school choice may not play a huge role (except in larger regional centres). As an example, for secondary education in rural and remote Australia, perception of education quality, and even the perception of choice, is marketed to parents, particularly when boarding school is the only option for secondary education—even when the choice is a ‘choice-less’ one (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander et al., 2015). And just as it does in Czechia, these perceptions skew the dynamics of secondary provision for rural and remote students. Those who have the necessary resources or ‘capital’ (or can access a scholarship) are more likely to have access to a better education than those who do not have that access (Osborne et al., 2019). Meanwhile parents who have the resources, believe that their children are getting a ‘better’ education, and those who do not are forced to take up the very limited options that are available in their home communities. While ‘choice’ might be seen to be a good thing by some, as Dvořák and colleagues’ article demonstrates it is not necessarily an equitable thing (James et al., 2021).

### **Social Space, Pedagogy and Identity**

Annette Morphett, Lisa O’Keefe and Kathryn Paige connect the concepts of social space, identity and pedagogy in the context of rural mathematics. They suggest that in their research context—the South Australian Yorke Peninsula—rural schools are under-theorised in their practice and face imposed identity deficits. The theories of ‘rural social space’ have been well developed over the last 15 years (Kline et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2010; White, 2015), but the intersection between rural social space, pedagogy and identity provides a novel adaptation and application of the theories relating to all three concepts. While Morphett and colleagues have focused on mathematics, there is no reason why their *Blueprint* could not be adapted for other curriculum areas. The *Blueprint* (or adaptations of it) could be particularly useful as a way for new teachers coming to a rural school to think through how their school’s context (as rural space) connects with who they are (their identity as teachers and rural residents) and how they teach (their pedagogy). In some ways, this article makes good common sense, but so often we read of concerns about the ‘quality’ of rural teachers and teaching, as if the metrocentric view of the world is the only way to be and to teach. Good pedagogy will always be contextualised (as suggested by Henderson and Mandalawi in their article), it will always take account of learners’ needs and will always be reflected in the knowledge and character of teachers. The *Blueprint* provides a sound theoretical bases for teachers and teacher educators to adapt to rural contexts.

### **Parent-community-school Partnerships**

Nomazulu Ngozwana, Maphuthi Lepholletse, Thulani Chauke, and Amohelang Machobane examine parental involvement in rural schools in Limpopo Province of South Africa. While the research does not claim to generalise the findings to other schools or regions, the data confirms the importance of parent-community-school partnerships in children’s education, consistent with international literature on this topic, with variations on the theme dependent on context (see for example Fricker et al., 2022; Kilpatrick et al., 2023; Zuckerman, 2020). Relationship building between parents and teachers/principals requires intentional work, but as noted by the authors, the benefits of strong partnerships are evidenced in increased emotional support for children, careers advice, modelling positive attitudes and potential learning outcomes. There are of course also benefits for school governance and financial management of resources. Referring back to the article by Dvořák and colleagues, one of the elements that makes a school ‘good’ or attractive, is the strength of the relationship between the school and the community. It is not just about grades and achievement.

### ***Collaborative Professional Support for Quality Special Education***

Kristina Ström, Gerd Pettersson, and Kim Wickman unpack the benefits and challenges around the professional support system for special educators in rural Sweden, making important contributions to under-researched areas of rural education—special education and inclusive education (Guenther et al., 2023). Using an online questionnaire with both teachers and special education consultants, they provide details about what is working well in the team approach to supporting teachers and students with special needs but also identify what elements require improvement. There were concerns around professional commitment, communication, trust, and the perpetual rural education problems with distance and technology in terms of accessing resources. Encouragingly, Ström and colleagues found this collaborative style of professional learning and support to have contributed to a sense of greater professional competence in special education, increased access to more professional development, and worked best with meaningful consultation. The challenges and opportunities with this form of professional learning also resonate with those faced by rural educators more broadly. The system of a centralised specialist supporting a number of teachers in different rural schools in-person and online, contributes to providing quality, tailored education for all students in rural places.

### ***Equitable Access to Higher Education in Remote Australia: Making Pathways Visible***

Andréa Jaggi, Kevin Guyurrurru Rogers, Helen Gabibi Rogers, Annette Yulumburruja Daniels, and Emilie Ens present a case study of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, located in southeast Arnhem Land. While this is not a ‘rural school’ the challenges and success factors discussed are not dissimilar to those faced by remote schools. Wuyagiba Bush Uni was designed to create a pathway for aspiring First Nations students from remote communities in the Northern Territory to be able to study at university. The quality of the education provided is underpinned by a both-ways learning approach that gives equal weight to traditional knowledge (‘cultural units’) and western knowledge (‘academic units’), which are awarded as micro-credentials through Macquarie University and on completion, count towards a semester of bachelor level study. Quality education is also reflected in the governance of the program, which is led by senior Elders from the region. The impact of the program is not only about completions—a little over half of those enrolled complete the micro-credentials—but about inspiring leadership, learning, employment and encouraging school-aged students to engage in learning, so they can ‘see what they can be’, an approach that has been recognised as a key mechanism for successful engagement in learning at any level in remote communities (Guenther et al., 2017; Guenther et al., 2015; Kinnane et al., 2014; Wilks et al., 2020). The case study highlights what is possible when culturally safe spaces and practices are applied in an educational setting.

### ***Metrics of Quality Education***

The Rural Connections article by Cat Holmes, John Guenther, Gavin Morris, Doris O’Brien, Jennifer Inkamala, Jessie Wilson and Rasharna McCormack, presents a case study of a unique school in central Australia in the context of research about engagement and retention for First Nations students in remote and very remote locations. Yipirinya School, located in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) was established in 1978 by Elders to address the lack of education for Town Camp children. The school offers students learning in Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte languages as well as English. It supports ‘two-way’ learning for First Nations children. The research is premised on an assumption that quality education requires regular attendance, engagement and retention, which in many remote schools, is well below what is considered adequate for strong educational outcomes. Yipirinya is in some ways no different, with an average attendance rate of just 35 per cent in 2023. However, as we noted at the start of this editorial, the metrics of the neoliberal system, do not necessarily capture what quality really looks like. The case study demonstrates some of the factors that contribute to quality: relationships, purposeful learning and cultural safety. This school does not adopt a ‘black box’

approach of quality education (Muhamedyev et al., 2020). It employs innovative approaches to improve learning opportunities for children and young people while retaining its focus on language and culture. Holmes and her colleagues conclude:

*The definition of attendance needs to be reconceptualised to meet the localised, holistic needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. Alone, the measurement of attendance fails to capture the complexities and nuances required to provide contextually purposeful teaching and learning.*

### **Student Perspectives on Attendance and Engagement**

In the second Rural Connections article, Rhonda Oliver, Helen CD McCarthy, and Lissy Jackson share a case study of Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed Vocational Education and Training School, a boarding school for Aboriginal students in remote Western Australia. With current students as co-researchers, they uncover the factors that keep students engaged and attending school. Students reported that a positive, supportive environment with a clear purpose for the curriculum are vital elements. This involves fostering strong relationships with peers, staff, and the wider community; promoting a culturally safe environment with ongoing connections to the local and students' home communities and staff that recognise their culture and ways of 'being and doing'; and a focus on preparing them for work after their schooling. These practices are not dissimilar to those applied in the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, in the case study presented by Jaggi and colleagues. Attendance is "not an issue" at Wongutha, suggesting they are providing their students with a quality educational experience that is relevant and enjoyable to them. In the wider consideration of 'what is quality education', student voices are critical to uncovering what is important in their contexts for their futures.

### **Equitable Quality Education**

Dipane Hlalele's book review of Cornish and Taole's (2021) *Perspectives on Multigrade Teaching: Research and Practice in South Africa and Australia*, summarises and sheds light on an issue facing many small rural schools in Australia and South Africa. Hlalele identifies that this book considers many of the issues associated with 'deficit lenses' or problems. In relation to the chapter on application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), he rightly points to the dated literature having missed out 'on current discourses'. The application of technologies to support rural and remote learning is rapidly changing, as we noted in the last issue of the Journal (Guenther et al., 2023), and the latest developments in thinking about how multigrade classes can benefit from ICT should have been better considered in this book. And generally, we agree with Hlalele's assessment of the book, that we 'need to look deeper into the phenomenon of locally or home-brewed strategies'. A quick reading of the book reveals that the authors believe that multigrade classrooms present a challenge to provision of 'equitable quality education' based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Sustainable Development, 2023), which perhaps ironically dances with the metrics of neoliberal 'quality'. The trap which we as rural and remote education researchers often fall into, is to draw on the metrics of deficit and disadvantage to justify what we call a pursuit of 'equity'. Hlalele correctly asserts that Australia has 'plentiful resources' in contrast to South Africa. But for all Australia's resources, it seems the political will to drive equitable outcomes for some of the most marginalised people—First Nations in particular—is not there. It seems that schools themselves, in Australia at least, are not ready to provide these young people with an 'equitable' education despite the 'good intentions' (Anderson et al., 2023) of policies designed to do this. The same may well be true in South Africa.

## Conclusions

Markers of ‘quality’ education in rural places both extend beyond and contribute to the neoliberal measurable metrics. The articles in this issue suggest that ‘quality’ rural education needs to be bespoke to its context. That requires careful consideration of the particular people, places, resources, relationships and temporality. These broader, contextualised markers of quality education in rural places should reflect local priorities and aspirations. This more relevant approach to education should be more engaging to rural youths which in turn may contribute to ‘better’ measurable outcomes—indeed many of the articles in this issue demonstrate these qualities. By recognising and promoting ‘what works’ in rural schools—what is considered quality and successful—we can continue to push back against pervasive deficit discourses.

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