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Rural Researcher and Practitioner Responses to Misrecognition and Distributive Injustice

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Abstract

The articles in this issue can be viewed through the lens of theories of recognition and distributive justice. These theories, when applied to rural education, point to the marginalisation and devaluing of rural education, such that some kind of remedy is required. The remedies for these are arguably the responsibility of systems that develop policies and provide funding for research and education. But we find that educators and researchers respond in their own way to the deficits and distributive injustices that are imposed on their roles in rural and remote communities. In the articles of this issue, we see researchers and practitioners investing their time, persisting and persevering despite apparent failure, engaging socially, and making space for the next generation of educators and researchers. The contexts in which these actions are taken vary, and so too do the expressions of these responses.

Keywords: *recognition theory, distributive justice, failure, investment of time, intergenerational leadership, sociality*

Introduction

The final issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* for 2024 brings together a set of research and practice articles which address significant issues for all sectors of the education system. The articles discuss theoretical and practical issues related to rural and remote students in primary, secondary schools and vocational settings, and those who are engaged in higher education pre-service preparation programs.

As I (John) was thinking about the editorial for this issue, I had the good fortune of hearing a lecture from my colleague Hernan Cuervo, who discussed a book chapter he has written for a volume edited by Simone White, Jayne Downey and Melyssa Fuqua on rural leadership (Cuervo, in press), and which should be available very soon! Hernan's lecture focused on the challenges of leading research and teaching through the lens of recognition theory. As I reflected on this lecture and the articles in this issue, I thought it might be helpful to see if the theory and the practical responses Hernan was suggesting were also reflected in this set of diverse articles. It turns out they are. I'll let Hernan now briefly provide an overview of his chapter.

Theories of Recognition and Redistribution in Rural Education Research and Practice

Rural education research has come a long way from Arnold and colleagues' '2005) cry about a scarcity of scholarship in the field. The last two decades has seen important research produced in

this space. In a similar way, rural teaching has gained a stronger profile in the Australian education policy scene. The latter has occurred probably in part due to the national and international school staffing shortages (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). This visibility of rural teaching is still, however, often depicted in deficit ways – rural schools are seen as challenging for staff and students' outcomes as lagging behind their urban counterparts. In other words, the urban continues to be the norm (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023). Other colleagues have pointed out that, within teacher education spaces in higher education, rural knowledge and content still do not feature prominently; thus generating the view of rural teaching and schooling as a discrete part of the whole practice and profession of teaching (Roberts et al., 2022).

The former, the research side, while becoming a stronger field, still exudes for some of its very leading scholars a sense of marginalisation vis-à-vis the broad education research field. Doing a survey of the field, we found that both national and international scholars revealed a disrespect or withheld recognition from the broader field. For example, Howley et al. (2014) recalled how, despite their vast experience within academic publishing, they found it hard to get published a journal article in mainstream education research that had rural and social class as the main foci of their argument. They questioned the "*cognitive dissonance*" (p. viii) of reviewers and the field at large. Leading rural education scholars, such as Corbett and White (2014) and Roberts and Fuqua (2021), are concerned with the misrecognition of the broader education research landscape and call for the development of methodologies and research that make rural matter. Corbett and White argued that rurality sits outside modernity and hence is easy to neglect. They came to produce an insightful book on rural education methodologies that can help seasoned and novice researchers in the space to find their tools for inquiry. Meanwhile, Roberts and Fuqua argued for the reversal of a metrocentric agenda that easily dismisses rural epistemologies and methodologies. While these issues and arguments are fully developed in the chapter (Cuervo, in press), here it is pertinent to engage with theory of recognition as a way to theorise this misrecognition in research and practice.

In thinking about rural education's misrecognition in education research and practice, I (Hernan) have pondered elsewhere if this is a matter of distribution or recognition (see Cuervo, 2020). This question relates to Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth's (2003) rich debate on justice. Without wanting to rehearse this well-known debate, it could be stated that Fraser proposes that remedies to injustices sometimes demand distribution of material resources and/or a recognition of the moral and cultural status of a social group, individual or issue at stake (see also Fraser, 1997). For Honneth, remedies to injustices and inequalities ultimately always emanate from an institutional expression of misrecognition, disrespect and denigration for a social group or individual (see also Honneth, 1995). For him, the main moral category at play in a situation of injustice is recognition. In a sense, both theorists affirm that economic (distributive) justice and cultural (recognitional) justice matter. Fraser will attend to each particular case to understand if the remedy demands both or one type of justice. Differently, Honneth, who does not shy away from the need of a politics of distribution of financial and material resources, views the root of any injustice as the cultural misrecognition or disrespect that other members of society or institutions can give to a certain social group. In other words, the lack of access to a certain resource is formed from the basis of a misrecognition or disrespect for that group or individual's needs, rights and interests.

When considering White et al.'s (in press) challenge of how we lead in rural education, I firstly thought about the question: what are the injustices we face about? As mentioned above, my experience in teacher education resonates with Roberts and colleagues' (2022) argument that rural education does not feature prominently in this space. As a result, I have found, for example, that pre-service teachers can build their understanding of rural work and life from anecdotes and stereotypes that often depict rurality on a binary: as the idyll or the deficit place. At play here, I

thought, is a cultural misrecognition by institutions to rural teaching and rural ways of being. As Roberts and colleagues posit, there is a withheld recognition in the national space of teacher education to the possibilities, needs and interests of rural schools and people. In terms of rural education research, it appeared to me that the overemphasis on the importance of rural matters by distinguished scholars in the field pointed to an epistemological harm based on disrespect and denigration, and social invisibility (see Honneth, 1995, 2001) from the cultural research institutions and individuals producing valuable knowledge in our discipline. The question was, as posited by White and colleagues, how do we answer and remedy these shortcomings and injustices?

Thus, secondly, I considered that, to redress this misrecognition of rural education, certain factors and practices needed to be carried out. Without reiterating what I stated elsewhere (Cuervo, in press), some practices need to be in place to make rural visible. In the first instance, to lead and/or contribute to recognise rural education research and practice time is critical. This means being prepared to dedicate your own labour and personal time to the idea and practice of making rural visible in a crowded space as that of education research. There is a commitment that demands, above many things, your time. And time, as we know, has become a valuable and often scarce resource. In addition, leading in any field entails failure. Samuel Beckett's (1983) now famous quote "*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better*." (p. 7) encapsulates the experience of many academics, including Howley and colleagues (2014). Our American colleagues experienced in the art of academic publishing encountered what Miranda Fricker (2007) would call an epistemic injustice, and most precisely hermeneutical injustice; that is, a structural prejudice in the attention economy of the crowded education research landscape. The cognitive gap from our broader education research colleagues to understand the relevance of Howley and colleagues' (2014) argument about the importance of class and rurality derived in failure for them. Nevertheless, this failure led to a vibrant edited volume on the intersection of rurality and social class that has become a research landmark in our field (see Howley et al., 2014).

Thirdly, I argue that leading to redress rural education's misrecognition involves, from oneself, sociality. This means getting involved and building dialogues and bridges with others to create a vibrant place of research and practice that generates the resignification of the cultural and moral status of rurality. Finally, to sustain a strong rural education research and practice place entails making space for others, in particular for upcoming colleagues. So fourthly, leadership involves an intergenerational approach to our concerns, activities and ways of being. If we really care about a space, thinking beyond ourselves is critical.

Responding to Misrecognition and Distributive Injustice

The articles in this issue, while not specifically focused on Cuervo's theoretical and practical positions, each draw out practices which align with his propositions related to investment of time, failure, sociality, and intergenerational processes of making space.

The article by Susan Webb, Reshmi Lahiri-Roy, Lizzie Knight and Paul Koshy explores geography, topography and mindset for rural tertiary education participation in Australia. The authors frame rural tertiary education as a "*policy problem*" (p. 2), noting the barriers and disadvantages experienced by students. They report on the "*senses of failure*" experienced by students who felt the pressure of "*not being able to leave*" (p. 8). However, they also found an accompanying "*resilience of the dispositions*" (p. 7) among those who cross the imagined borders of opportunity. They argue that undervaluing rurality results in perpetuated social injustice, arising from "*symbolic and cultural barriers to participation*" (p. 12). Here we see a direct connection to misrecognition and cultural injustice driven by and perpetuated by policies and structures that reinforce and perpetuate discourses of rural deficit and failure. Following Honneth (1995, 2001), what Webb and colleagues point out is the disrespect to the cultural and moral status of rurality.

Catherine Thiele, Joanne Casey, Linda Eager, Susan Simon and Shelly Dole present research on a pre-service teacher preparation program conducted in Queensland. They highlight the importance of sociality in their descriptions of "*connecting and connectedness*" (p. 28) and attribute these characteristics in school leaders to the success of the program they investigated. While this does not surprise us, we wonder why the leaders' "*intentionality*" (p. 26) of building trusted and reciprocal partnerships is so significant for rural education programs. Perhaps it is the case that people from urban centres, for example, participating in rural pre-service preparation programs, have few connections with people in rural contexts, and perhaps the converse applies for rural students going to an urban university. Perhaps the intentionality described by Thiele and colleagues is a requirement as a way of overcoming the cultural injustice created by the perceived geographic barriers between the rural and the urban. In Thiele and colleagues' article, the tensions between Fraser and Honneth's remedies for injustice are quite palpable. What is certain from the article is that resource allocations or "*redistributive remedies*" (Fraser, 2008, p.16) are required to create the partnerships and relationships that would otherwise not exist.

Next, Tshering Tshering, Joshua Matthews, and Rachael Adlington discuss teacher attitudes to Information and Communication Technology in Bhutan. This mixed methods study used survey instruments to assess relationships between attitudinal variables related to technology utilisation. In this context (a developing mostly rural country), it is perhaps hard to see how there could be a misrecognition of rurality. However, from a distributive justice perspective, technology utilisation is affected by available infrastructure. The authors note:

> *In the Bhutanese colleges of education, the first-order barriers of poor internet connection and lack of necessary software persist. Further, the findings highlighted the connection between first- and second-order barriers, in which poor infrastructure (first-order barrier) results in poor attitude (second-order barrier). (p. 48)*

In terms of response, teachers expressed feelings of incompetence: "*interview data analysis revealed 'ICT incompetence' as a main cause of negative attitudes toward ICT acceptance and use in teaching*" (p. 48). In this, we can see a sense of failure as described by Cuervo. While the study does not directly address misrecognition of rurality, there are clues in the analysis, suggesting that deficit discourses are directly associated with the lack of infrastructure and the poor use of technologies. This then is why a redistributive justice is perhaps required, not just at a national level, but from a global perspective (Heins, 2008).

Simone Healey and Glenn Auld's article presents a framework for culturally responsive boarding. The authors highlight the sociality of boarding in terms of relationships between students and boarding staff, parents and their children in boarding facilities and communities. They also point to failure where "*the evidence suggests that First Nations student experiences were negative and the antithesis of Culturally Responsive Boarding, ultimately demonstrating what doesn't work, rather than what works*" (p. 68). Looking through the lens of recognition theory, there is some irony in the phrase "*culturally responsive boarding*." The need for boarding for remote First Nations students, or residential facilities more generally, comes about largely because so-called remote culture and place are devalued. That is to say, the prevailing policy perspectives are premised on the assumption that it is not worth investing in local education solutions. The devaluing of local education solutions corresponds with a ready acceptance of distributive injustices.

John Guenther, Rhonda Oliver, Robyn Ober and Catherine Holmes explore the issue of why many remote First Nations young people drop out of school before completing secondary schooling. Coming back to Cuervo's responses, in this article we see failure and resilience sitting side by side. The failures, though, are not necessarily the result of practitioners or researchers. Rather, they are the product of limited access to secondary education in remote communities and the systemic misrecognition—or undervaluing—of people who live in remote communities. While

the political discourses around education are about making education equally accessible and available to all, regardless of location, the reality is different. The authors comment that "*less than half of all very remote communities [have] reasonable local access to Year 12*" (p. 84). Surely this is inconsistent with the claims of the Mparntwe Declaration (Education Council, 2019) which states that education systems should support "*every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face*" (p. 2). This calls for the moral and cultural resignification of all social groups, places and ways of life and is surely another reason for proposing redistributive remedies.

Our collection of four Rural Connections papers begins with an article from Lisa Moore, Rachael Macfarlane, Nigel Wakefield and Serena Davie. The authors document the work of Western Australia's School of Isolated and Distance Education. This is an example of a systemic response to the access problems noted by Guenther and colleagues. Not surprisingly, consistent with Cuervo's call for sociality in rural education, relationships stand out in this article as a way of breaking the barriers—relationships between staff and students, and relationships with communities. The work of the Regional Teaching Teams is clearly an attempt to give recognition to the values, cultures and contexts of the students they are working with. The authors describe several initiatives that work to provide that recognition, including learning and working on Country programs. Cuervo's call to invest in time is also noted by the authors, along with a recognition of the need to remedy the systemic cultural injustices that exist:

> *The team recognises that it will take time to build relationships and trust with local communities … to deliver appropriate educational outcomes. Whilst there is support in principle from Government agencies, a disconnect still exists between policy and practice in the context of Aboriginal education in schools. (p. 97)*

Kathryn Thorburn and Catherine Ridley report on research conducted in another part of remote Western Australia. As with Thiele and colleagues, the themes of connections and connectedness come to life in the case study of Yiyili Aboriginal Community School. The authors describe connections and partnerships with external support services, parents and community members, and local staff. These relationships are a strong reflection of Cuervo's call for sociality in rural education. Importantly, the authors also talk about the need to make space for the school's future sustainability: "*Supporting … local staff to feel valued via training and via proper salaried positions would be an investment in the foundations of that connection going forward*" (p. 105). Here too we see evidence of recognition at play, such that the community respects the school and the school respects the community: "*Interviewees told us that feeling safe was not only about an absence of bullying, but that it also related to a learning environment where culture, language and values are respected*" (p. 104).

Robyn Ober's case study of Nawarddeken Academy in west Arnhem Land provides another illustration of successful engagement in First Nations people in education, despite the challenges noted by Guenther and colleagues above. This case study is a good example of the benefits of investing in time. Ober begins by outlining the story of the school which began with the vision of a Bininj Elder, Professor Bardayal Lofty Nadjamerrek OAM in 2002. It took 13 years for the first campus of the school to open, and another six years of dogged determination (including failures!) to achieve registration for all three sites the school now operates in. The school was established in part because community members and Elders were not satisfied with what the Department of Education was offering (two days per week in two of the homelands). That is, the Elders saw this in terms of a misrecognition of the value of their people and their Country, and so they set about remedying the cultural injustices themselves, garnering support from philanthropic organisations and the main employer in the region, Warddeken Land Management Limited. The school and the three homeland sites have successfully turned the injustices around and are very proud of the recognition they can give to language and culture through on Country learning. They are also making space for the next generation of teachers and community leaders.

Our final article in this issue, from Jaemie Page, takes us to other parts of the Northern Territory and, instead of schools, deals with the important issue of adult learning. Page's work here focuses on "*building language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills*" to enable "*rangers to understand more about what they are doing and why they are doing it*" (p. 116). He talks about the importance of time and sociality: "*Projects such as this require long-term commitment to build trust and relationships*" (p. 117). While his work is important, it possibly would not be necessary but for the misrecognition and the systemic undervaluing of First Nations people living in many remote communities. The distributive justice remedy for this is at least to some extent reflected in the work that Page does (and others like him) to allocate resources to where they are needed. Of course, the cultural and economic injustices that have come from decades of misrecognition and marginalisation in these contexts cannot simply be remedied with foundation skills training, but this is an important first step.

Concluding Remarks

Beyond the theoretical and pragmatic responses to rural misrecognition and redistributive remedies, the articles in this issue draw attention to educational justice issues. In 2024, why is it that within a developed country like Australia we are still talking about access to secondary education (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023), let alone access to full-time primary education in remote communities? And why do we still rely on boarding as a solution to the systemic failure to deliver education in rural and remote locations, when the evidence of potential harm is so strong (Guenther & Osborne, 2021; O'Bryan, 2021)? Why are we even talking about proper salaried positions in remote schools when we know how important a local school workforce is (Guenther & Disbray, 2015)? And why do we have to justify the need for good professional learning and experience programs, as a way of ameliorating so called rural disadvantage (Patfield et al., 2024)? Why are we still talking about basic adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills in remote communities, when such issues should have been addressed in primary school (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment & Training, 2022)? These questions deserve an answer.

The articles in this issue provide some answers to these questions and, as Hernan and I have discussed, the reasons for the research problems which have been investigated here stem in part from misrecognition of rurality and distributive injustices. Maybe the agenda for rural education research going forward should include questions and answers about policy and funding injustices, about reorienting the metropolitan public's thinking about the deficits of the rural, and about addressing some of the supposedly intractable problems that clearly do have solutions.

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