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# What's Rural About Rural Education Research?

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## Abstract

This issue offers readers a broad range of articles that discuss various aspects of rural education in different learning settings in Australia, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand and Japan. One of the common threads we bring out in this editorial is about the 'rurality' of rural education research. Drawing on the articles we provide an answer to the question: 'what's rural about rural education research?' We conclude that rurality in rural education research reflects teaching and learning. It is contextual, based on the place, where knowledge is generated from the rural. Importantly too, it draws from the realities that make rural education unique. Rural education research reflects the values of the place and uses methodologies which give voice to the people of rural communities. It is relational rather than transactional. It is not the opposite of research in urban areas, and it should not be seen as a reaction to metrocentric views of the rural as being in some kind of deficit. As you read through this set of articles, we encourage you to take time to consider how rurality intersects with education and research.

**Keywords:** *rurality, rural education, research, rural values, rural realities, rural knowledges*

## Introduction

> *Standing on the banks of the mighty Clarence river, I watch students learn about landscape and landforms, but in this same process they also learn about human movement, biology, and the interaction that occurs between human architecture and the architecture of the natural world. It is holistic learning experience that allows connections to be made between different parts and how these parts form to make the whole; the place, their place. The Clarence becomes the classroom and the silent educator. The fast-moving water, the wildlife, the rowers out in the water, the shopping trolley laid to rest on the banks of the river – these are all connected to a particular moment in time here. The students see how one element influences all others and, as part of this, knowledge is co-constructed in a place that is constantly evolving and shifting as these differential elements interact. I see now that the rural is generative in nature. Dr Christopher Hudson, observational research notes.*

The above observational notes are taken from a current research project investigating school success in rural New South Wales, Australia. We leverage these observational notes to make a strong assertion at the outset of this editorial: rural places are generative in that they create

knowledge and connection between knowledges. Rurality is not a passive bystander or a constant. It is variable, contextual, and an active participant of knowledge creation (Harry et al., 2024; Knight et al., 2024; Wooltorton et al., 2022). Too often in educational research there exists place unconsciousness and the context is not brought into the conversation as relevant to the research. As part of this, we quite often see rurality positioned as a footnote, a side quest, a nice-to-know contextual shrug off, and we maintain that this does not advance knowledge *in* the rural, *for* the rural. In other words, just because a project occurs in or studies something in a rural place, does not necessarily make it rural education research. It is therefore timely to return to the question that Bill Green asked us to consider when it comes to our research and practice, "*What does the adjective 'rural' do*?" (2013, p.17).

In this editorial, we wish to draw a line in the sand between research that is simply set in or is about 'the rural' and research that deeply, actively engages with rural places as separate and unique contexts. We advocate for two calls to action: (1) if rural is claimed to be the focus of the research, then place needs to be brought to the front of consciousness and described in detail as a core component of the research, and (2) deficit discourses about rurality need to be countered, shifting to ones that focus on the generative nature of rurality. Only by actioning these calls are we able to answer the question which is the focus of this editorial: what's rural about rural education research?

To emphasise this even further, we use the analogy of a vehicle. We cannot consider rurality to be universal, else we forget that many different parts make up a vehicle, and different vehicles have different parts of different, size, shape, order, structure, and purpose, albeit falling under the same classificatory umbrella as a vehicle. What we continue to see in rural education research is a lack of descriptive analysis of the rural 'parts' in a particular moment in time; the industry, the local knowledges, the geology, the social relations, and the interactions that occur between them all that culminate in a deep understanding of place—the rural social space (Reid et al., 2010). Without an examination of the parts, 'rural' is used as a blanket cover all term for something that is not metropolitan—the same vehicle, but different and lacking because of this difference. We must shift this rhetoric.

Through this issue, we bring to light the importance of educational researchers foregrounding place in their research. Many of these contributing authors examine the parts of their rural 'vehicle', describe them and their relationships, and demonstrate how one rural place might be considered different to another. By doing this, we shift our perspective to the generative nature of rural places and, as others before us have noted, a 'pedagogy of the rural' (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018) which places as its focus not on what we bring to rural places, but on what rural places teach us about ourselves and others.

## Articles

Staley, Freeman, Seamer, and Papatraianou report on a study that followed a program designed to increase phonological awareness in three Northern Territory (Australia) rural schools. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the evidence they and others report (Carroll, 2016; de Witt & Lessing, 2016), the intervention resulted in positive improvement for the students. The authors note that "*when rural educators can access professional development and hone their own skill set, they can implement practices which unlock student capacity at an age where children are primed for oral language acquisition*" (p.13). Herein lies a problem for rural education. It is quite likely that rural teachers (especially in the Northern Territory) are not going to be able to access the professional development they need. Without it, they may be less likely to recognise barriers to phonological awareness such as otitis media induced hearing loss (Sharma et al., 2020). Further, in many Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory where English is not the language spoken at home, children may have trouble recognising the foreign sounds of English. One should be asking

why is this such an issue for rural communities when, presumably, it is not such a problem for urban communities?

Taylor, McDonald, O'Dea, Manning, and Cosby examined how perceptions, gender, and role models shaped the agricultural career aspirations of 495 high school students in the Gippsland region of Victoria, Australia. They found that positive perceptions of agriculture and the presence of sector-specific role models were the strongest predictors of student interest. Interestingly, the authors found that gender and parental occupation did not significantly influence career choices, but social exposure through role models had a direct and positive impact on career interest within the agricultural space. By focusing on a regional ecosystem where the agri-food sector was the primary economic driver, the authors demonstrate how the rural acts as a distinct social network that shapes student self-efficacy with industry, specifically in agriculture.

Khoza explored the factors influencing learner engagement in classroom questioning within rural Life Sciences classrooms in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. They identified six key factors affecting engagement, such as learner anxiety, language barriers, and teacher orchestration of questions. Engagement was also shaped by whether topics like the history of life resonated with learners' religious or traditional beliefs. This article contributes to the issue's theme by positioning rurality as a complex pedagogical strategy to better understand student engagement, rather than merely as a reference to geographic location. In doing so, Khoza presents the rural as a unique psychological landscape, whereby building cultural and religious understanding is necessary to maximise rural students' engagement in subjects such as Life Science.

Swai and Burton investigated the integration of vocational skills into secondary curricula in rural Iringa, Tanzania. Guided by Open System theory, they found that stakeholders saw vocational education as crucial for fostering self-reliance and bridging the youth unemployment gap. However, they noted that implementation is hindered by systemic barriers such as resource scarcity, theft of school materials, and a lack of scheduled practical sessions. The authors highlight the often delicate and contextual interplay between the enactment of national curriculum policy and local survival strategies in rural places that are under-resourced.

Duchesne, Avitaia, and Brown drill down into the ways non-traditional students experience belonging and feel supported at regional campuses of the University of Wollongong, Australia. They take a strengths-based approach with a starting point of that all students can and should feel a sense of belonging during their university experiences. The authors consider the particularity of places – down to specifics such as tearooms – and their role in creating a "*culture of community and support*" (p. 81). Importantly, their work highlights how a sense of belonging contributes to student success, including retention. They close with the assertion that "*place, identity and relationships were all visible contributors to belonging… Rather than separate models of belonging these elements interacted with one another.*" (p. 82) This contributes to our argument of rural places as generative, not simply a passive context.

James and Keenan unpack the type of 'place' study hubs are in their article. These study hubs have successfully played a part in increasing Australian regional/rural/remote students university participation rates through their place-based and community-centric nature (Baker et al., 2025; Keenan, 2025). As with the previous article (Duchesne et al.), the authors identify some of the 'little', often quite practical things, that make a place feel welcoming and inclusive. They argue that these regional hubs are third spaces and as such "*they foster a culture of learning and community engagement*" (p. 97) in regional, rural and remote areas in addition to their directive to provide academic support. Again, this article – as do so many in this issue – argues for a nuanced, deep consideration of place in the role of regional, rural, and remote educational experiences.

Schmude, Whannell, Tighe, and Munday report on the development and trial of a toolkit for teaching academics to better support their regional, rural, and remote students to be engaged

with their studies. The toolkit was designed to help alleviate the barriers their off-campus students may experience compared to on-campus counterparts who have more ready access to university supports in-person and whose disengagement may be noticed sooner. The authors found that the toolkit enabled earlier intervention with disengaged students with enhanced outcomes, and minimal additional workload for the teaching academics. This article highlights that when the physical place of students is considered, technology can assist universities to proactively close the transactional distance, an important factor to consider in the ongoing effort to widen university participation (Australian Government, 2024).

James, Hogan, and Thiele tackle another thorny issue of workload for rural teachers in the context of well-intentioned philanthropic initiatives designed to support preservice teachers' rural, regional, and remote placement experiences. Philanthropy undoubtedly creates opportunities (Rowe & Di Gregorio, 2025), especially for schools and communities that struggle to find resources to make programs work well (Roberts et al., 2021). But the authors here describe the additional work that this creates as "*cruel optimism*" (p. 121) where staff take on extra tasks as intermediaries for the sake of the greater good (see also Rowe & Di Gregorio, 2025). The dynamic the authors describe creates a conundrum for rural educators who see a need and a solution to a problem, but then have to make it work. Of course, the potential negative impact of philanthropy is just one of many reasons why rural teachers feel stress and leave (see for example Williams et al., 2022) but one of the key lessons from James and colleagues' study is that apparent benefits of programs and interventions may not be perceived that way by teachers.

Next, Byth, Nash, Bradbury, Fitzgerald, White, and Kardaris tackle an old chestnut about pre-service teacher placements in non-metropolitan schools. Like others (for example Hudson et al., 2021; Thiele et al., 2024; Versland et al., 2022), they argue for place-based approaches that are not seen as just another alternative to metropolitan placements, but as a contextually nuanced experience that is controlled and led by people from the rural space. The basis for concern in this article and others that report on pre-service placement options, is the need to attract and recruit staff to rural schools. This is a long-standing issue that comes up time and again in the literature (Guenther et al., 2023). Rural experiences for undergraduate students can have a profound impact, but clearly, as Byth and colleagues suggest, they are not enough to adequately build a pipeline of rural teachers who not only are attracted to rural communities, but who want to stay. This is perhaps more of a problem now than it was in previous decades when there was an excess of graduates in metropolitan areas.

The issues reported here are global concerns, as Ajani notes in his article in the context of South Africa. He discusses pre-service teachers' use of critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills through Self-Regulated Learning, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge, and Social Justice Pedagogy. Ajani also highlights resource and infrastructure limitations, which have a significant impact on rural pre-service teachers' motivation to work in rural schools. However, Ajani's work demonstrates that teaching coupled with a strong curriculum that encourages collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication, can and does make a positive difference to student perceptions of their experience at university.

Louth and Sanderson take a more optimistic and positive approach to the issue of rural workforce attraction. Using a visual methodology, the authors explore how images connect teachers to place. Their work describes the importance of 'place-consciousness' (see also Louth, 2025; Macdonald et al., 2025; Thiele et al., 2023) to build connections with their environment. Similar to Hudson's reflections at the start of this editorial, they focus on "*natural beauty, serenity, and time to enjoy outdoor pursuits, where participants felt these helped them to cope with the pressures of teaching*" (p. 172). These connections add to the social connectedness that is often an intrinsic part of life in rural communities. By doing this, the authors enable us to see the

richness of rural life, countering arguments of deficits which Ajani and James and colleagues have addressed in their work.

Erawan, Erawan, Kaosa-ard, Kanawapee, and Chowwachart share findings that identify key attributes for beginning teachers in remote Thailand who participated in the Kru Rak Thin Project which aims to 'grow your own' rural teachers. They surveyed beginning teachers, their principals, and their mentor teachers. They found these program participants were well-suited to their new profession in their home-locales in part because they "*have a strong connection to the familiar local environment … [and] can see the benefits of their contributions to the community and feel appreciated for their efforts*" (p. 207). These findings support the need for beginning teachers to be community-ready not just classroom-ready (White, 2019).

Finally, Coffey-Oates and McNaught use the Social-Ecological Framework to shine a light on the various barriers rural and low socio-economic students if they want to enter medical school. They stress that limits to accessing medical school are not due to students lacking motivation or ability, but a variety of complex, interwoven factors from the systemic level down through individual experiences. The cumulative effects of these entrenched barriers can blunt rural youth aspiration and seem almost a deliberate deterrent, despite the crisis level in rural medical workforce shortages. These barriers and calls for reforms from stakeholders echo those we have heard perennially in the field of rural education (Guenther et al., 2023), many of which stem from a lack of consideration of rurality or of the generative nature of place.

### *Rural Connections*

The Rural Connections article for this issue details the underpinning themes of rurality of a Summer School for international postgraduates delivered by the authors Hernan Cuervo, Yoshihito Ii, and Maiko Aoki in 2025. By sharing the conceptualisations and theories intentionally used to plan and deliver the Summer School, the authors contribute to the Journal's mission of "*strengthening the research and practical links between Australian and international rural education*". Theirs is an example of deliberately centring *the rural* in rural education and education research. Beyond the specifics of the Summer School itself, their piece adds to our issue's theme by reinforcing that conscious effort is required to ensure 'good' rural research and practice.

### *Book Review*

Cuervo reviews *Educated Out* by Mara Tieken (Tieken, 2025). He pulls together many of the threads of rurality that authors in this issue have highlighted. The book tracks the journey of nine students who attended an elite college in New England. Noting that earlier in this editorial we pushed back against deficit discourses of rurality, the reality that Tieken describes in the American context is "*spatial injustice*" (p. 5). The issues of rural marginalisation/othering, under-resourcing, failed meritocracy, misrecognition, and deficit discourses repeatedly come to the fore. This is despite the apparent hopefulness that marks the start of their college journey, and the persistence they exhibit. Cuervo also picks up on another theme of 'resistance':

> *For these students, attending an elite college is an act of resistance: "kids from here" aren't expected to go to an elite school, and they have little help getting there. When they arrive, they learn that many college opportunities aren't available to them, that belonging is often provisional, and that after graduation, they can't return home. (*Tieken, 2025, p. 16*).*

The 'portraits' that Tieken creates are sadly reminiscent of many rural young people in other places across the globe, who have to learn to leave (Corbett, 2007), or leave their home Country, language, and culture behind to attend boarding or residential schools (O'Bryan, 2021) with an expectation that they will be 'resilient' (Mander & Lester, 2021; Rutherford et al., 2020).

## Summing up

Putting these contributions for this issue together, we can see the complexity of rurality in its relationship to education. What we see reported are many of the challenges associated with rural people's ongoing engagement in education, from the early years through to university and beyond. In the early years, as reported by Staley and colleagues, we see problems associated with teaching phonological awareness that would never exist in an urban context. While schools in urban settings certainly have students whose first language is not English, to the best of our knowledge, there are none that have a cohort of Indigenous students who speak a traditional language or creole, and who have not learned early literacy skills in their first language. Byth and colleagues respond to the seemingly intractable problem of rural teacher recruitment, suggesting that rural placements are inadequate on their own as vehicles for building a rural teacher workforce. Swai and Burton's article about vocational education in secondary schools highlights the failures of systems and school structures to adequately prepare rural young people in Tanzania for future work. And reading Cuervo's book review, we could also see the many challenges of rurality coming to the fore.

But it's not all bad news! Taylor and colleagues' finding that the rural acts as a distinct social network, shows the potential strength of social capital that learners can draw from. Erawan and colleagues offer similar suggestions, stressing how important local connections are for students returning to their home communities. Similarly, Louth and Sanderson's findings about the recognition of natural beauty among rural teachers new to the space, offers an alternative frame of reference in addressing recruitment and retention of rural teachers.

Further, despite the challenges identified in several articles, it is evident that many problems have a solution. This is evident in Duchesne and colleague's work, which shows how within a culture of community and support, non-traditional university students can feel an even stronger sense of belonging than traditional students. Cuervo, in his Rural Connections article highlights how negative perceptions of rurality from urban students can shift with the right connections so they become rural allies. In a South African rural context, which might otherwise be characterised with deficits, Ajani demonstrates how good curriculum and teaching strategies can ameliorate the apparent challenges. Khoza, also in South Africa, demonstrates how barriers to engagement in the life sciences can be broken down when teachers understand students' anxieties and recognise how important language is (also noted by Staley and colleagues). Schmude and colleagues also offer solutions to problems of distance students' engagement and retention at university. Their work highlights how easy to use tools can facilitate better communication/feedback with students and may support sustained engagement outcomes for rural students.

## So, What's Rural about Rural Education Research?

We now return to the question posed by the title to this editorial: What's rural about rural education research? Clearly, as Cuervo and colleagues point out in their Rural Connections article, there is something about the 'right to be rural'. This is an ontological statement that speaks to the lived experiences of rural education researchers. One might argue that researchers from outside rural spaces or with no experiences of rural life, have no place *doing* rural education research. How then might the rural-curious approach and do 'good' rural research? Authors in this issue have also spoken about the epistemological aspect of their work. Picking up on Hudson's opening quote, knowledge that is generated from place has a certain legitimacy that is often not recognised by those outside the rural. This is not to suggest that knowledge systems derived from the metropolitan world have no place in the rural—they do. But knowledge production—which is arguably what research is all about—must be grounded in the knowledge of the place where it is created. Louth and Sanderson, in their article, conclude with an important

statement: "*If fostering rural consciousness in early career teachers can change the deficit narrative associated with these locations, then the adaptability and mindfulness of these teachers can result in deeper connection to community values*" (p. 187). Replacing the word 'teacher' with 'researcher' would make the statement equally true. There is something in this that speaks to the axiology of rural research (Downes et al., 2021), where what is right for the rural comes to the fore.

In most of the articles in this issue, rural students, teachers, parents and community members are given voice to express what is important to them. Recognising and honouring them is perhaps a key entry point for new-to-rural researchers, following White and colleagues' advice "*to enter a new place, policy space, or heated discussion with curiosity and cultural humility*" (2024, p. 265). Rural education research is centred on the values of the rural, speaking back to the assumptions of the metropolitan, that so often dismisses or homogenises the values of those in rural communities. Finally, there is a methodological answer to the question we posed. As some of our authors have pointed out the strength of many rural communities lie in the relationships that draw people together. Rural research is, therefore, intentionally relational in its methodology. This is particularly true of rural Indigenous communities where 'yarning' (a conversational approach) is applied (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010), where the conversation in research flows from relationship, not from some kind of transaction (Ober, 2017). The 'rural' in rural education research is, therefore, about place-based knowledge, relationships, values, and being rural.

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