Situating and Interrogating Contemporary Australian Rural Education Research

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This opening article in this special issue about Australian rural education research develops three key points. First, the Australian literature reflects the complexities of defining the terms regional, *rural,* and remote, *with many definitions deriving from a fixed and disabling urban-rural binary. That literature also contains a number of success stories of educational innovations in rural Australia. Second, the conceptual and methodological resources underpinning the Australian literature need to be interrogated to ensure that they avoid deficit constructions of rural Australia in favor of more productive understandings that recognize and value rural educational innovations. Third, the articles in this collection provide points of potential dialogue between American and Australia rural education researchers committed to mapping and celebrating diversity and innovation.*

The function of this article is both to introduce this special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and to provide a point of departure for the articles that follow. In pursuing these aims, the article is concerned with addressing three organizing questions:

- What are some major themes and concerns of contemporary Australian rural education research, as manifested in recent literature?

- Which conceptual and methodological resources can be deployed to engage with those issues and concerns?

- How do the assumptions underpinning the production of this issue provide opportunities for dialogue with researchers into American rural education?

Australian Rural Education Literature

Historically, two characteristics about Australia have made it an interesting and distinctive place in which to live. While many other countries are relatively small in area and large in population, Australia is a big country with a small population. People living in the outback have always had to be resilient in order to survive. Under these conditions, one might expect that Australians would be inventive, but their isolation and their pioneering spirit also led them to be innovative, particularly in the areas of transportation and radio communications.

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Railway development in Australia is a story of its own, with each state going its own way and a patchwork of varying gauges ensuring that systems were incompatible. Trains, however, could not solve problems of distance for people living in isolated parts of Australia, where the terrain was not conducive to land travel. It was air travel that contributed most to reducing the isolation and tyranny of living inland and away from the more populated seaports. With the perspective of time, it can now be seen that innovations such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the School of the Air, which provided much needed medical and educational services for people in the outback, also led to dispositions conducive to living in a globalized world.

In the meantime, and even today, Australia has had to continue to work hard to ensure that people living in regional, rural, and remote parts of the country have access to many of the advantages that are available to those living in the cities. Governments have made conscious efforts to redress differences and resources have been directed toward these efforts. Interestingly, however, the problems are not the same across the country. For example, in Western Australia the largest part of the population lives in the capital city of Perth whereas in Queensland the population is spread more evenly throughout the state (see also Luck, 2003). These differences in settlement patterns impact on the provision of transport, medical, and educational services.

The expectations of regional, rural, and remote Australians have risen and, although governments and other bodies are responding, the extent to which this has occurred may not necessarily be a point of agreement between people living in urban and rural parts of Australia. It is interesting to witness the ways in which communications between these bodies and Australians in regional, rural, and remote areas have developed recently. A quick search on the Internet shows a plethora of addresses that indicate how the services

and innovations that were distinctively Australian, such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the School of the Air, are now supplemented through technologies used globally from around the last decade of the 20th century. Globalization and internationalization, therefore, impact directly on all Australians, regardless of where they live. It could be argued that Australians are more likely to recognize and respond to issues of globalization and internationalization because they have always responded positively and innovatively to distance.

Turning to the Australian rural education literature, which of necessity we examine selectively rather than representatively or comprehensively, we are concerned with two particular themes:

- approaches to defining the terms *regional, rural*, and *remote*; and

- examples of innovation in educational provision.

These two themes reflect, in turn, two major foci of this journal issue:

- the enduring legacy of the deficit and disabling urban-rural binary; and

- the existence of educational innovations in large numbers and varied forms in Australian rural education.

With regard to approaches to defining the terms *regional, rural*, and *remote*, Australian educational researchers are faced with a plethora of definitional possibilities, of which we present three. First, the Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Structure identifies the following Australian regional types:

- major cities of Australia;

- inner regional Australia;

- outer regional Australia;

- remote Australia; and

- very remote Australia. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Regional Statistics: Rural and Regional Statistics National Centre [RRSNC], n.d.)

Second, the Australian Standard Geographic Classification has four categories of areas based on population:

- major urban areas (with 100,000 or more people);

- other urban areas (with 1,000 to 99,999 people);

- rural localities (with 200 to 999 people); and

- rural balance areas ("the rural remainder"). (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Population-population characteristics: Socio-economic disadvantage across urban, rural and remote areas, n.d.)

Third, researchers from the University of Adelaide (in South Australia) and the Australian Commonwealth Department of Health and Community Services have developed the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), which measures remoteness in terms of access along road networks to services centers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Population-population characteristics: Socio-economic disadvantage across urban, rural and remote areas, n.d.).

While we recognize the considerable intellectual work that has been expended in producing these and other categorizations, we are concerned about some of the premises on which they are based. Our concern about those premises was illustrated starkly by the following statement in a landmark policy statement by the Australian Commonwealth Schools Commission in 1987 entitled *Schooling in Rural Australia*: "Rural Australia was defined as being all of the nation excluding . . . [seven] greater metropolitan regions and, generally, areas within 50 km of those regions" (p. 24). This construction of "rural Australia" being *not* the seven "greater metropolitan regions" positions explicitly rural Australians as being other in relation to, and in comparison with, metropolitan residents, whose lives and experiences are thereby privileged as constituting the norm against which nonmetropolitan residents are measured and found lacking or wanting.

We do not see our task here as being to put forward alternative definitions of *regional, rural*, and *remote* that we consider superior to, yet just as fixed in place as, those outlined above. Rather, we wish to argue that *any* such definitions are framed by the contexts to which they refer and by the ideological assumptions and priorities of the researchers who deploy them. From that perspective, our preference is to emphasize flexibility and fluidity in conceptualization, rather than an obsession with fixed and unchanging definitions. This approach resonates with Cameron-Jackson's (1995) insight that "the supposed rural/urban dialectic is actually diffuse" (p. 1), and also with d'Plesse's (1993) contention that "the correlation between distance and the evidence of remoteness in populations is not necessarily clear" (p. 13).

In relation to examples of innovation in educational provision, we regard such examples as the best possible riposte to deficit and disabling definitions of *regional, rural*, and *remote* as being other than and to the metropolitan center. These examples demonstrate a balance between, and a combination of, two crucial propositions:

- that metropolitan sites do not have a monopoly on effective educational practice; and

- that sometimes being on the geographical and other margins creates opportunities for exciting initiatives that are less likely to occur closer to the centers of bureaucratic surveillance.

Three brief examples must suffice here of the kinds of educational innovations in rural Australia that we have in mind; many more will be identified in the articles to follow in this issue. Garbutcheon Singh and Harreveld with Hunt (1997) articulated a "conceptual framework for sustainability" (p. 152), based on their close examination of the possibilities presented by new technologies for adult literacy teaching and learning in Central Queensland. Two of the editors and another colleague (Danaher, Hallinan, & Moriarty, 1999) found grounds for similar optimism "for a reinvigorated Australian rural education" (p. 60) in the lived and educational experiences of mobile circus communities in Australia. Finally, Eversole (2001) argued that three particular strategies could be used to enhance access to educational services for rural Australians: "via innovative delivery styles, diversification of the client base, and differentiation of educational products" (p. 85).

Conceptual and Methodological Resources

There is a range of different conceptual and methodological resources that can be utilized to engage effectively with these themes and concerns of contemporary Australian rural education research. They allow us to draw out the complexities of educational experiences in regional, rural, and remote areas and to challenge what appear to be fixed and orthodox conceptions of these experiences.

In particular, we seek to challenge the orthodoxy that conceives of educational experience in non-metropolitan areas in deficit terms. This orthodoxy is generated discursively through positing fixed binary oppositions between center and periphery, progress and decline, proactive and reactive, animated and moribund. In Australia as elsewhere, this pathological discourse conceives of regional, rural, and remote communities through images of death and disease: "the terminal decline of our rural communities," "the dead hand of drought," and "the peril of youth suicide in rural areas."

A characteristic illustration of this disabling discourse was a magazine article (Wynhausen, 1998) about rural youth in Australia (see also Danaher, Moriarty, & Hallinan, 2001). The article outlined several problems afflicting the youthful residents of Wellington in rural New South Wales. These problems, which were attributed to failed policies and uncomprehending policymakers, included alienation from school, unemployment, and suicide. Two representative quotations from the article are worth citing:

Living behind the inevitable social pressures and what it is tempting to call the psychopathology of rural life, with its worship of firearms, its dependence on alcohol and its emphasis on self-sufficiency, are emotional problems country people don't like to talk about. (p. 18)

Similarly:

Research generally suggests that between 16 and 20 per cent of children and adolescents have significant mental health problems. The experts tend to agree that in Australia rural youth face the greater risk. They're more likely to commit suicide, to have fatal accidents and to abuse alcohol. (p. 20)

It might be tempting to refer to the psychopathology of rural life, but such a conceptualization runs the considerable risk of essentializing and homogenizing the disparate and heterogeneous lives of Wellington's young residents. Indeed, extrapolating from this analysis, residents of regional, rural, and remote Australia might be presumed to carry weapons, drink alcohol, commit suicide, and/or have fatal accidents almost as a matter of course. This is not to discount or downplay the particular challenges of living in such locations; it is to reject the deficit model underpinning constructions of nonmetropolitan Australians as less normal and more problematic than their metropolitan counterparts.

Another limiting effect of these kinds of (mis)representations is to configure rural experiences in terms of a single industry and mode of being. During the 2002-2003 drought in Australia, a group of metropolitan business and media figures organized a charity response, involving concerts and other events, which they named Farmhand. This conflation of rural experience and farming explicitly omitted other forms of rural life, such as Indigenous Australian communities and residents who, rather than working the land for their livelihood, have a different relationship with it.

This conflation between rural living and farming has other implications. It is accompanied by a discourse that conceives of drought as a malevolent, alien force that needs to be countered to save the farmer; hence there have been various proposals to drought-proof the land, including outlandish schemes to turn Australia's rivers in-land. An alternative

view that dry conditions, far from being exceptional, are a constituent part of the Australian environment, and that rural residents must learn to live with these constituent conditions, is effaced from the discursive landscape of the nation, at least as it is configured within the Farmhand project.

In contrast to the values informing the Farmhand project, we can look at an alternative strategy in rural community-building generated from within the community itself. This example relates to the Pinefest event, held each September and October on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland. This event was previously known as the Pineapple Festival and featured festivities such as a street parade and a ball to celebrate the community's pineapple industry. While volunteers formerly organized the festival, now its operation involves the work of specially employed event organizers from within the local shire council working with a wide variety of business and community groups. The change of name to Pinefest reflects a corporatizing of the festival's identity, and also a response to changes within the Capricorn Coast community that has seen the relative decline of the pineapple industry and the growth of alternative industries such as tourism and education. In other words, the change of name and identity of this rural festival represents a proactive response to the need to reconfigure and resignify community events in response to the challenges of economic and sociocultural change.

We have used these examples of different responses to representing and valuing rural experiences to provide the grounds for evaluating the contribution to making sense of such experiences that different conceptual and methodological resources can provide. In challenging the simplicity of deficit conceptions of rural educational experience, we seek to engage critically with the ways in which these conceptions are produced, the positions from which they are made, and the possibilities for countering such assumptions. In so doing, we also acknowledge that, while many of the technologies, practices, discourses, and images framing Australian rural education are generated from elsewhere, it is the work carried out in response to these forces at the chalkface of these localized learning communities that generates educational capital and value.

As such, we are concerned with promoting the voices and experiences of those directly involved in Australian rural education. We acknowledge the institutional and discourses in which these voices and experiences are framed. Thus we are interested in exploring these experiences at both a contextual and a textual level. At a contextual level, we can analyze such factors as the impact of technological change, government policies and provisions, and globalizing influences on ideas, cultural practices, and movements of people and goods and services. At a textual level, we can examine the moves rural educational providers and consumers make in order to navigate their way through these contextual

factors and create spaces in which their own meanings and values can be expressed.

Dialogue with American Rural Education Researchers

The strength of a journal issue such as this lies in the diversity of views expressed around a specific focus. Nevertheless, we consider that the benefits outweigh the potential risks of seeking to articulate certain assumptions held in common by the contributors to this issue. The purpose of this articulation is to situate our fellow contributors and ourselves in relation to pressing issues in contemporary Australian rural education research, and thereby to suggest possible points of dialogue with our American counterparts.

Proceeding with due caution, then, we wish to suggest the following as assumptions with which the contributors to this issue might agree, *albeit* with certain qualifications:

- There are real challenges, as well as opportunities, associated with learning and teaching in Australian regional, rural, and remote locations.

- It is crucial to separate analysis of those challenges and opportunities from deficit models that construct non-urban as inherently deficient and marginal (see also Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

- It is incumbent on rural education researchers to seek new ways of mapping and celebrating the diversity and richness of educational experience in contemporary Australia.

- Paradoxically, part of that mapping and celebrating involves the recognition that educational innovations continue to occur at what is conventionally constructed as the geographical margins.

It remains to suggest some possible links between these assumptions and particular assertions by recent contributors to this journal. For the latter, we have elected to focus on Volume 15, Number 1 (1999, Spring), the issue devoted to rural student achievement. This focus reflects partly our shared interest in the concept and complexities of student achievement and partly our view that that issue illustrates our broader conviction of the potentially fruitful connections to be made between American and Australian rural education researchers.

The editorial by Howley and Harmon (1999) rehearsed many of the themes to be found also in this journal issue. In particular, many Australians would understand the assertion

of "the mythological principle" whereby "[r]ural people are necessarily lesser, more backward, and decidedly uncultured people" (p. 3), while the insight "that rural and urban places make one another" (p. 3) resonates with both our recognition and our contestation of the powerful urban-rural binary.

As Howley and Harmon (1999) identified, various themes were represented in the theme issue about student achievement. One such theme was the degree of benignity of policymaking affecting rural education: Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, and Reeves (1999) assumed that such policymaking is by intention benign, while Haas (1999) countered that the conceptual categories underpinning such policymaking must be challenged. Similarly, in their investigation of the links between economics and education in rural areas, Pittman, McGinty, and Gerstl-Pepin (1999) found that, rather than economic development automatically contributing to educational benefits for all, "[i]t seems more likely that, within the national frame, some states and some regions are economic and educational winners and some are losers" (p. 29). The articles in this issue also engage with the local repercussions of national and regional policies.

A second theme in the issue on student achievement was the extent to which locality influences such achievement. Fan and Chen's (1999) statistical comparison of rural, suburban, and urban secondary school students' academic achievement demonstrated that a student's ethnicity and whether s/he attends a private or a public school have a greater impact than locality on academic achievement. Hughes (1999) found likewise that the nature of school programs and the expectations of staff members, rather than the attitudes of students, differed significantly between high achieving and low achieving rural schools. This finding resonates with the Annenberg Rural Challenge's (1999) policy statement on standards in rural public schools, including its concern that such standards can all too easily be appropriated by forces that have little to do with educational achievement: "local control can be—and often has been—badly abused by racism, ethnic or religious bigotry, vested economic interests, or social privileges" (p. 60).

The preceding overview of a selected issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* reveals a diversity of views about what rural education is, who constructs it and who its constituents are, its meaning and status *vis-à-vis* urban education, and its links with other fields of analysis such as economics. We hope in this opening article in a different journal issue to have highlighted similar themes informing the contemporary agenda in Australian rural education research. We hope also to have identified a number of points of potential dialogue between American and Australian rural education researchers, based around these and other questions. Now we turn the spotlight on our fellow contributors to this issue, so that they can continue the conversations, in the process adding their shared and respective emphases and

insights. We trust that the resulting volume will be one with which readers of this journal will wish to engage, as part of an ongoing exploration of rural education research.

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