Understanding rurality in Australian education research.

Philip Roberts, Associate Professor (Curriculum Inquiry & Rural Education), University of Canberra, Australia.
with Natalie Downes, University of Canberra, Australia.
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Abstract:
The release of the report of the independent review into rural, regional and remote education (Halsey 2018) provides a much-needed focus on the unique challenges and opportunities rural, regional and remote communities encounter. Notably, the review calls for further research into rural, regional and remote education, and in so doing invites the education research community to engage with this space in their work. However, the rural is a difficult site to define, with the definitions engaged with implicitly linked to the construction of the research object, the methodologies engaged with, and the phenomena observed.   This I argue, necessitates bringing research from a wider educational audience into rural education debates, and the participation of this wider audience in these debates.

To illustrate this point, I introduce the idea that there are a multiplicity of meanings of the rural (Roberts & Green, 2013). Indeed, determining just what is rural and what rural itself means a central pre-occupation of rural studies (Woods, 2011), and something that remains an ongoing topic of debate and discussion. Recognising this complexity, models representing the rural advanced in the rural social sciences tend to be multidimensional – encompassing statistical, cultural, spatial and cultural dimensions. The resultant multiple ways of representing the rural tend to draw upon divergent epistemological traditions, emphasising that researching the rural must similarly draw upon various epistemological traditions. Here I highlight these multiple models to emphasise the point that defining the rural, and then by association, rural meanings in research, is inherently complex and contested.

Building from these definitional dilemmas I introduce the relationships between rural studies (rural sociology & rural geography) and rural education. I suggest that the rural education field has tended to work from within its own boundaries. Consequently the field has been becoming increasingly narrow and removed from the parent disciplines. While rural education is somewhat ambiguously placed it draws primarily from the traditions of sociology and geography, with broader engagements with the non-education fields of rural sociology and rural geography. Important here I suggest that sociology, and the sociology of education, does not engage significantly with the rural – hence the development of sub-fields of rural education and rural sociology. Consequently, scholarship is necessary in order to bridge these divides and enhance the quality, and breadth, of scholarship in all related fields. Supporting this claim I make reference to a recent empirical study (under review) of how the 'rural' has been referred to in the last twenty years of Australian education research. I also note recent theoretical advances in rural studies, and explore how these relate to rural education research.

I argue that a lack of engagement with rural definitions, and their relationship to how we conceptualise and undertake research, policy and practice, contributes to the continuity of metro-centricity/metro-normativity in education research, policy and practice.

1: Definitions & background.
i.   In 2011 over ½ the world's population can be defined as 'urban'! what does this men for how what is 'normal' is understood?
ii.   Multiplicity of meanings of the rural (Roberts & Green, 2013).
iii. Soja: 'Seeking Spatial Justice' (2010) examines the spatial dimension of justice and how inequity is spatially produced. It argues that traditional approaches to social justice are dominated by **historical** and **social** ways of understanding the world. These are 'fixed' in space, or space-neutral. That is, the geography of justice is only a backdrop that social practice happens within and not a substantive factor in creating and producing inequity. Soja proposes 'spatility' as a third way of seeing the world, in a trialectic relationship with historical and social approaches. Sees geography, space and place as important ideas in social justice.
iv.   Gruenewald's (2003) formulation of a critical pedagogy of place
v.   Nespor (2006) centre-periphery dynamics need to be reconsidered,
vi.   Spatial turn in social theory (Gulson & Symes, 2007)
vii. Howley, Howley and Yahn's (2014) call to engage with rurality in research
viii. Sher and Sher's (1994) call to value rural people and communities.

2: Modernity as the move to the city.
i.   Williams (1973) in 'The Country and the City' contends that the city constitutes the vision of modernity, which produces a 'city-centeredness' that informs 'taste'.
ii.   Soja (2010) - modernity as primarily about urbanization and the development of the urban-industrial state.
iii. Foucault (1984), the city was the organizing principle for the governing rationality that was to apply to the whole territory of a state in early modern Europe.
iv.   Metro-normativity (Green, 2013) or Metro-centricity (Roberts 2016) - assume the metropolitan experience to be normal and do not allow opportunities to consider other perspectives.

3. Biddle & Azano (2016) Constructing and Reconstructing the "Rural School Problem": A Century of Rural Education Research.
- Examine 100 years of rural education research in USA
- Research in this area boomed in the first half of the 20th but waned in the second half of the 20th century.
- Neoliberal economic policies and the precariousness of rural economies revived interest - but largely restricted to a few sub-field journals.
- 3 periods:
    – 1909 – 1945: Identifying and Defining the "Rural School Problem" - a concept drawn from early work on this topic by urban educational reformers.
    – 1945 – 1980: The Adolescence of Education Research and the Decline of Rural
    – 1980 – Present: Exploring the Meaning of Rural Education within a Globalizing World Economy

4: Independent review into rural, regional and remote education (Halsey, 2018; 2017)
i.   Call's for further research into rural, regional and remote education.
ii.   Very little 'rural SIG' research cited. Roberts, Guenther, Corbett, Halsey, Vichie, Plunkett & Dyson.
iii. Most research, and all of the above, cited was 'open access' and/or online.

iv.   NO Green, Reid, White, Cuervo, Graham, Cooper, Kilpatrick, Sharplin or Trinidad. Or the 'real' work of Roberts, Guenther or Corbett.

v.   Review relied upon non-rural studies, grey literature, older research, international studies and submissions from communities.

vi.   Draws mainly on statistical studies & reports. Statistical reports & grey literature hold precedence. An 'evidence' bias?

vii.   This absence raises serious questions about the impact of rural education research in Australia, and the effectiveness of rural education researchers in impacting education policy.

5. In Australia, some reference points:
- Peterson & Rodwell (1993) 'Essays in the history of rural education in Aus & NZ'
  – Sociologists of education discuss the 'urban model' being imposed on rural areas.
  – Main thrust 1870-1930 was reinforcing economic movement for settlement (settling farms)
  – 'modern' economies have limited rural workforces - many rural kids always had to leave, local workforce needs (primary production, mining etc).
  – school not always useful to these communities (curriculum issue)
- Turney, Sinclair and Cairns (1980) in 'isolated schools: Teaching, learning & transition to work'
  – rural places as ones where the conditions of living were poor, where teacher housing was scarce, ill maintained and of low quality.
  – kids get poor results, access a limited curriculum and have few work opportunities – these were normalised issues teachers had to deal with.
- Darnell & Simpson 1981 'rural education: In pursuit of Excellence' (WA)
  – recognise the general neglect of rural education and problems of staffing, poor outcomes, curriculum access.
  – was looking at new ways to engage with the issues, was philosophically orientated to 'overcoming disadvantage'.
- W. F. Connell's history of reshaping Australian schooling (1993)
  – "an effort to establish the universality of urban standards of behaviour which were strongly reinforced by the mass media" (1993, p.58)
  – "Rural culture and education, by 1960, suffered not so much from the tyranny of distance as from the possible tyranny of the metropolitan connection" (1993, p.58)
  – "problems of distance and isolation, indeed, still existed" (Connell, 1993, p.58), but the development of 'area schools' led to the loss of small differences in relation to the rural as they increasingly came to resemble the urban.
  – "The metropolitan connection, however, acted more as a benevolent despotism, than as a tyranny", Connell (1993, p.58)
  – Notes the lack of congruence between parental attitudes and schools' aims among rural communities than urban ones.
  – "it appeared that the system was, in effect, an instrument which favoured middle-class male, urban students" (1993, p.59)
- Reports the last 40 years
  – Karmel 1973 – poor outcomes
  – Boomer 1988 – poor outcomes, but noted a rural difference

- McKenzie et al 1996 – less curriculum access in rural schools
- HREOC 2000 – hard to staff & poor outcomes
- Vinson 2002 – poor outcomes & hard to staff
- NSW DET 2005 – poor outcomes & hard to staff
- Roberts 2005 – hard to staff
- Halsey, 2005 – hard to staff
- Simerr 2006 – poor outcomes & hard to staff
- Bradley 2008 – poor access and achievement
- Gonski, 2011 – poor outcomes
- R(T)EP 2008 – hard to staff, poor outcomes, but also good ones.
- TERRAnova – hard to staff, but not always and often good outcomes.
- IRRRRE – Halsey 2018 (see above)

6. Review of Rural Research (with Natalie Downes, UC)
   i. Searched AJE, Critical Studies (and its precursor), APJTE & AER for the terms 'rural', 'remote', 'regional', & 'provincial', and examined per; if and how they were defined, use in the study, use in interpretation of the phenomena, use in theorising. I.e. Engaging with rurality or not engaging with rurality. **Less than 5% that used 'rural' actually engaged with rurality!**
      a. Same for Education in Rural Australia (1991-2011) – here about 26% engaged with rurality!
      b. Same for AIJRE (2011 -) – here about 18% engaged with rurality, most post 2015.
   ii. Overwhelming majority of research is qualitative. Scant quantitative studies published by researchers, main exception SiMERR
   iii. Periods:
      a. Early- late 90's
         i. Rural disadvantage in comparison to metropolitan, as an issue of equity and a justification for research
         ii. Issues of isolation
         iii. Rural decline and education - social and economic change
         iv. Later 90s – slight consideration of the changes in rural areas in teaching and starting to challenge notions of disadvantage. Concern for rural futures, lack of skilled workforce etc. & educations role in this.
      b. Early 2000s
         i. Rural disadvantage prominent. Esp. related to the HEREOC report as justification
         ii. To overcome 'traditional' disadvantage and trial technology.
         iii. Increasing frequency of challenges to the traditional notion of disadvantage- such as identifying the metrocentric influences on the view of rural disadvantage.
         iv. Rural decline an issue
         v. Focus upon higher education.
         vi. Increasing focus on PST and beginning teachers
         vii. and negative issues faced in rural schools.
      c. Mid-late 2000s

       i.   Rural disadvantage is still prominent, but used in different ways towards the later 2000s.

      ii.   (mid-2000s) A positive engagement with the rural as unique, the importance of context and place and the uniqueness of rural schools and communities.

    iii.   Move from access & perceived equity to Teacher education, PST and beginning teachers.

     iv.   But, negative justifications e.g the challenges of new teachers, retention issues, attraction issues etc.

      v.   (late 2000s) Rural disadvantage is used in relation to the Bradley Report (2008).

     vi.   used as justification of what the rural is lacking-such as access to higher education.

    vii.   Rural sustainability begins to enter the conversation.

  d. Late 2000s -2015

       i.   Bradley Report justification continues

      ii.   Rural difference and preparing PST and beginning teachers still a focus

    iii.   Questioning the urban focus of education and policy Esp. AC & ACARA)

     iv.   Issues around Rural sustainability and the role of schools is prominent. This is a shift in language and focus.

      v.   The importance of the rural, and Rural research are emphasised in the later years with new directions for research proposed.

  e. Other:

       i.   Throughout all years there are studies which are 'locational' only. That is, they don't engage with the rural at all, they just happen to be a study in a rural school or, as the majority of cases, a study undertaken with a regional university.

      ii.   Indigenous issues are scattered throughout, but rare.

    iv.   Last points

      a. Curriculum not an issue, save questions, about the 'relevance' or 'acceptability' of the official curriculum for rural communities (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; HREOC, 2000).

      b. Green and Letts (2007) - Australian education is 'spatially blind', resulting in a particularly large set of centralised education systems that have been historically justified as being in the interests of equity and quality for rural communities.

      c. Ethical issues of representing rural and places

      d. Corbett & White (2014) Doing educational research in rural settings.

      e. We need others to genuinely engage in this space.

7. The rural studies link – defining the rural.

     i.   Rural studies frames 'the rural' positively, in its own right and recognises the plurality of meanings and definitions.

    ii.   We look at rurality as knowledge producing and culturally meaningful, not absent of knowledge and value or deficit as much education and social research does – see modernity point above.

iii. The rural is inherently spatial (Halfacree, 2006). '[t]he idea of rurality seems to be firmly entrenched in popular discourse about space, place and society in the Western world' (Cloke, 2006, p. 18).

iv. The multiple ways of representing the rural tend to draw upon divergent epistemological traditions, emphasising that researching the rural must similarly draw upon various epistemological traditions.

v. Halfacree (2006). Three-fold model of rural space: rural locality (inscribed through practices of production and consumption), formal representations of the rural (particularly how it is framed in capitalist consumption), and everyday lives of the rural (with reference to culture).

vi. Cloke (2006). Three theoretical frames: functional (land use and life linked to land), political-economic (social production), and social (culture and values).

vii. Balfour, Mitchell and Molestone (2008). Generative theory of rurality: rurality as context, forces (space, place and time), agencies (movement, systems, will) and resources (situated, material and psychosocial).

viii. Reid et al. (2010) rural social space model: demography (population, culture, people), economy (work, industry, production), and geography (environment, place). Looking at how these may come together in relation to defining particular rural communities.

ix. Howley and Howley (2010) propose three rural community types: durable agrarian (sustainable rural industries), resource extraction (mining, logging), and suburbanizing (becoming other than rural).

8. Fields

i. The rural education field has tended to work from within its own boundaries. Consequently the field has been becoming increasingly narrow and removed from the parent disciplines.

ii. Rural education is somewhat ambiguously placed - it draws primarily from the traditions of sociology and geography, with broader engagements with the non-education fields of rural sociology and rural geography.

iii. Sociology, and the sociology of education, does not engage significantly with the rural – hence the development of sub-fields of rural education and rural sociology.

iv. Consequently, scholarship is necessary in order to bridge these divides and enhance the quality, and breadth, of scholarship in all related fields.

v. New possibilities…

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