

Rural Educations' Rubicon

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AARE, University of Sydney, 5/12/18.

1. The problem:

The release of the report of the independent review into rural, regional and remote education provides a much-needed focus on the unique challenges and opportunities rural, regional and remote communities encounter. However the report, and the federal government's response, was a missed opportunity to address the longstanding challenges facing rural schools. More significantly though, it raises serious questions about the impact of rural education research in Australia, and the effectiveness of rural education researchers in impacting education policy.

At this moment we need to ask 'what went wrong?' and 'where do we go from here?' as a research field. While we may welcome the review's call for further research into rural, regional and remote education, such a call implies that there is an absence of research. Furthermore, the review largely ignored much of the rural education research produced in Australia. Instead the review relied upon non-rural studies, grey literature, older research, international studies and submissions from communities. Why was so much recent Australian research overlooked? What does this mean? And what do we do as a result?

Responses to such provocations must also be considered in the context of the productivity commission report on the national evidence base, which questioned the quality and impact of Australian educational research more broadly. As we look ahead to the proposed education research clearinghouse recommended under Gonski 2.0, how do we ensure our research is impactful?

2. 3 points of 'data'

A. Independent review into rural, regional and remote education

- i. Very little 'rural SIG' research cited. Roberts, Guenther, Corbett, Halsey, Vichie, Plunkett & Dyson.
- ii. Most research, and all of the above, cited was 'open access' and/or online.
- iii. NO Green, Reid, White, Cuervo, Graham, Cooper, Kilpatrick, Sharplin or Trinidad. Or the 'real' work of Roberts, Guenther or Corbett.
- iv. Review relied upon non-rural studies, grey literature, older research, international studies and submissions from communities.
- v. Draws mainly on statistical studies & reports. Statistical reports & grey literature hold precedence. An 'evidence' bias?
- vi. 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.

B. Staffing research

- i. Downes, N & Roberts, P. (2018). Revisiting the schoolhouse: A literature review on staffing rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia 2004-2016. Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 28 (1), pp.31-54.

- ii. Attraction, retention, preparation of teachers & leadership focus
- iii. Most 'approaches' have been pre-service based.
- iv. Most research has been variation on a theme.
- v. P. 45 'The continuity upon a theme within the staffing studies over the past twelve years, we suggest, presents the rural education field with an interesting challenge: if we have such a well developed understanding of the issues, challenges, and successful approaches, why then are rural schools still hard to staff and why are the approaches proven to work not universally adopted by education jurisdictions?'
- vi. p. 46 'it suggests a need to develop new ways to address the intractable dilemma of rural school staffing on a broader scale'

C. Review of rural research

- i. Roberts, P. & Downes, N. (2016) Constructing the rural school in Australia: A century of Rurality and Rural Education Research. Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference. November 27 -December 1 2016, Melbourne: Australia. Paper coming...
- ii. 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.
- iii. Overwhelming majority of research is qualitative. Scant quantitative studies published by researchers, main exception SiMERR

3. Do we need champions?

- i. Impact has been driven by a handful of researchers, consequently their focus and 'roles' have shaped it.
 - a. NCSEHE – equity of access
 - b. RT(E)P, TerraNOVA, RRRTEC – pre-service preparation focus and with ATEA – Reid, Green, White.
 - c. The Sig – White & Reid
 - d. SPERA...?
- ii. Post review there will be an increase in interest (hopefully)
 - a. UNSW Gonski Institute, led by Adrian Piccoli, has a rural focus within.
 - b. Other researchers may see opportunities in this space – but if they don't *understand the rural* how do we relate to them and their research?
 - c. We don't own this space – so why do we come together here and why do others not identify here? How do we sensitise them to our concerns and understand the history of the work in this space?
 - d. Sig book – aiming to start a conversation.
- iii. We need to problematize the data & statistics used in government, think tank and non-government organisations re rural - draw in the big data critiques that are developing and help make them sensitive to issues of rurality.

- iv. Internationalisation & international comparative studies – opportunities.
- v. We need to prepare now for the next review in about 12 years (...Schools Com 1988; HREOC 2000; IRRRRE 2018...)

4. Where does rural education sit?

- i. Is it a distinct area of education studies or a specific theme across them?
 - a. What is its relationship to other fields of education studies, and other fields of the social sciences and humanities?
 - b. If rural education is informed by practice (review responded to practice submissions) does that make us an area of practice research? As opposed to...?
 - c. Or is this just a symptom of the general condition of Australian educational research and the dominance of standards and registration
- ii. 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.
- iii. 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.
- iv. 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.
- v. Consequently, scholarship is necessary in order to bridge these divides and enhance the quality, and breadth, of scholarship in all related fields.
- vi. There is much to be gained, theoretically, methodologically and by way of examples, at the intersections of rural studies (geography & sociology) and education. e.g. – a lot of ‘place matters’ work in our space, but it often uses rhetorical reasoning, whereas can link to rural studies and draw on approaches and theories there and a long tradition of work.
- vii. New possibilities...

5. Connections with the fields

- i. Drawing on Furlong & Lawn (2011) ‘Disciplines of Education: Their role in the future of Education Research’

Sociology of	Connect with rural sociology; many of us are specifically or implicitly sociologically informed – but do we apply existing ideas more than generate new theory (obvious exception of RSS model – Reid et al (2010))
Psychology of	Impacts of teacher turnover; aspirations; marginalisation & self-concept...
Philosophy of	What does it mean to be rural in modernity?, the purpose of education in rural areas;
History of	Role of rural school in developing community, economy, dispossession,
Economics of	Market within rural towns & between towns & the city; examining input-output issues re school size & outcomes & travel...; Contribution of school to local economy;
Comparative & international	e.g rural education in China; Understanding rurality through comparative studies; global rural;
Geography of	Connect with rural geography; patterns of access & achievement;

	school closures & distances; changing towns....
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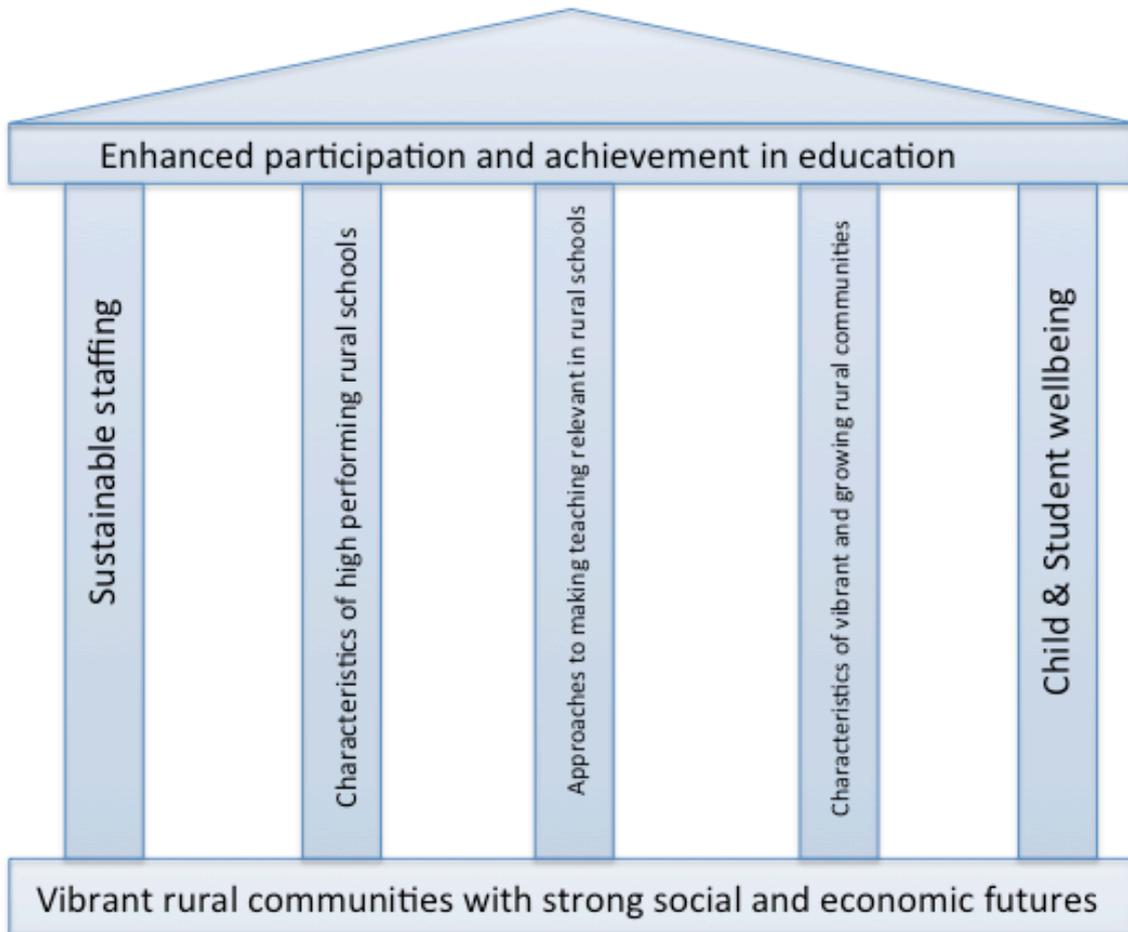
ii. Other 'fields'

Curriculum inquiry	Roberts, Reid; Green; Knowledge in/for/of the rural; relevance of AC; access and achievement; Focus on knowledge
Policy studies	Contra metro-normativity; Access and achievement; post secondary; community economic development; Agriculture development
Ethics	Symbolic violence upon the rural; reinforcing deficits; an 'easy' hook
Research methods	Statistical studies are needed; place-sensitive; contested nature of rurality
Social justice	Cuervo; Roberts; Spatial Justice; different 'justices' of the rural
Youth	Cuervo; Youth Studies Centre (Melbourne); youth futures & opportunities

iii. The areas identified in IRRRE (Halsey 2018)

Curriculum & assessment	Appropriateness of curriculum; needs of rural communities; fairness of assessment;
Teachers & Teaching	We focus a lot here, esp. pre-service & staffing. Rural pedagogies; Not so much teachers lives, longitudinal studies?
Leaders & Leadership	We also focus a lot here, esp. attraction & retention, but do we look at impacts on learning, longitudinal studies?
Schools & community	Is our focus here limited to the staffing issues? Do we really look at this broadly speaking? Community engagement; which community; Aboriginal histories & schools; working for or against?;
Transitions	Focus of NCSEHE work;
Philanthropy	Reinforcing deficit? And metro/class advantage? Narrow focus of funders
Entrepreneurship	Affordances of some community with relevant capitals v those without;
ICT	SiMERR; Southgate; modes of curriculum 'delivery'; resource access; staff PD;
Access	Curriculum & resources; modes of access; new approaches to teaching appointments; for students and for teachers;
(Diversity)	A body of work re inclusion and rural (C. Reid); service access; link to NDIS & telehealth;
Transitions	Focus of NCSEHE work. Minister Tehan suggested that there have been no ARC studies on improving rural students university achievement (Nov 2018); stay or go?;

6. A possible rural education research program



Outcomes after 7 years:

1. To have raised the performance of all schools in Regional Rural and Remote Australia,
2. Narrowed performance gaps (academic, wellbeing, attendance),
3. Expanded the professional development of the RRR workforce,
4. Created an environment of sustainable improvement in RRR schools,
5. To have contributed substantially the research and evidence base in RRR education.

Issue	Outcome	Benchmarks
Rural schools are hard to staff	Practical: Improve the attraction & retention of teachers to rural schools	1 year: Set up longitudinal study & review literature.
	Research: Understand the internal and external drivers of teachers decisions to work in or leave rural schools through a longitudinal study.	3 year: Initial findings and set up trials. Deliver policy proposals.
		5 year: Evaluate trials and modify.
		7 year: Evaluate and recommend implement long-term strategy.
Rural school success is not well understood, and often left to chance.	Practical: Share the factors of success in rural schooling with the profession at large.	1 year: Create dashboard of factors implicated in successful rural schools. Identify successful schools.
	Research: Account for the drivers of success in rural schooling and create these conditions in other locations.	3 year: Account for the factors driving success and set up trials in new locations & teacher PD.
		5 year: Evaluate impact of trials and account for drivers & barriers of success. Revise PD.
		7 year: Provide evidence of drivers of success and recommend policy & practice reforms.
Teachers need to enact the curriculum in ways meaningful to students' life worlds, whilst also providing new opportunities.	Practical: Enhance the capacity of teachers to draw on local knowledge in their teaching.	1 year: Identify high performing rural teachers.
	Research: Develop curriculum models drawing on local knowledges and pedagogies for ITE.	3 year: Outline the curriculum & pedagogy practices of high performing rural teachers. Trial in new sites and Initial Teacher Education (ITE).
		5 year: Evaluate trials and provide case studies of practice.
		7 year: Embed new approaches in ITE curriculum for rural schooling.
Schools operate in communities, however the relationship between community characteristics and rural school achievement is not well understood.	Practical: Develop tools to develop community capitals from early childhood to post-school.	1 year: Statistical analysis of school-ABS data and relationship to educational achievement.
	Research: Understand the deep, and intergenerational, influences on educational achievement in non-metropolitan locations and approaches to mitigate limiting influences and enhance developmental influences.	3 year: Case studies of communities. Identify growth and limiting factors. Set up community trials.
		5 year: Evaluate impact of trials and account for drivers & barriers of success.
		7 year: Provide evidence of drivers of success and recommend policy & practice reforms.
Early childhood and student wellbeing are the foundations of a meaningful life	Practical: Enhance smooth transitions from early-childhood through to post-secondary education and community participation.	1 year: Initial study of wellbeing factors and establishment of benchmarks.
	Research: Account for the rural community influences on child and student wellbeing, and promote the fostering of these conditions.	3 year: large-scale study of wellbeing and influences upon wellbeing at school and community levels. Roll out of trial interventions.
		5 year: Evaluate impact of trials and account for drivers & barriers of success.
		7 year: Provide evidence of drivers of success and recommend policy & practice reforms. Longitudinal study of child & student wellbeing and transitions.