

Independent review into regional, rural and remote education

Response

Submitted by

Michael Corbett
Professor of Rural and Regional Education
University of Tasmania

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In this short submission I would like to highlight a number of issues that I think arise from the international literature on rural education that are germane to policy discussions in Australia. There are a number of pragmatic issues around rural education that inevitably arise in rural education discussions and these include: a) attracting teachers to hard-to-staff schools, b) out of field teaching, c) transportation logistics (bussing, boarding, etc.), d) the role, use, and potential of distance learning and new communication technologies, e) the importance of the human teacher, f) rural cultures and how they fit with state educational agendas, g) rural workforce requirements, and h) the relationship between education and rural to urban migration.

None of these are new problems and they are best addressed together in a coordinated fashion. In my view Australia should develop a coordinated rural development policy that has as a central feature a national rural education agenda that seeks to insure balanced growth and prosperity across the range of physical and social geographies that the Commonwealth includes. Referring principally to urban inequality, Edward Soja (2010) has called this idea by the name of “spatial justice. I think this idea can be profitably applied to social inequality across rural/regional and remote Australia. With this core idea in mind I will raise a number of specific recommendations that are supported by international research in rural education.

1. ***Cooperation and collaboration is the key.*** There is a strong body of evidence that suggests that rural schools work better when the natural advantaged of size and scale is maximized. The most powerful way to do this is through multisectoral cooperation (Miller, et al, 2017). While they have an important and unique mission, schools are part of something larger and the way they operate will inevitably reflect the sociocultural context in which they operate. If that context is economically challenged and isolated (and this is not just a question of geographic isolation, many urban communities are just as “isolated” as the most remote rural locales) from the institutional mainstream of the broader society, there is an incrementally greater need for multi-sectoral programming.

Because they are “small societies” rural communities have the advantage of the potential strong face-to-face relationships and collaborative work. Considerable research has demonstrated that small rural schools work well to mitigate the problems of community economic disadvantage. For instance my own work in the northwest of Tasmania and in Atlantic Canada, I have found that given their economic disadvantage, that rural schools seem to “punch above their weight” in the sense that when socioeconomic disadvantage is taken into account, educational results are excellent. So rather than focusing on what has been called for a century or more the “rural school problem”, it might be possible to explore better the rural school advantage (Corbett and Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Luschel et al, 2016; Reeves and Bylund, 2006; Theobald, 1997).

Finally, the most effective forms of multisectoral programming attempt to provide something resembling a typical middle-class upbringing to children born into socioeconomic disadvantage. The most prominent of these are the Harlem Children’s Zone (<http://hcz.org/>) and other similar programs that represent thoroughgoing support for children and families trapped in multi-generational poverty beginning with the pregnant couple and continuing on until the child reaches tertiary education. Obviously, this kind of programming is resource-intensive, but I would argue that rural communities often contain the seeds of good will and conviviality to achieve something similar. Can we imagine a rural community that simply decides to “adopt” each and every one of its pregnant couples about to deliver a child into poverty? How might policy support this vision?

2. **Each community is different.** There can be no silver bullet solution to the educational challenges in rural communities because each contains demographics, histories, social organization, power dynamics, and a distribution of resources and access that are particular to that place. In concrete terms, rural communities are marked not so much by their similar grids and services as are urban places, but rather by the affordances of the natural environments in which they are located. Historically, most rural places were established because of proximity to some natural resource or in some cases because they are situated at central locations in transportation networks. Today, many of these places have established post-productive economies (Woods, 2011) that are not reliant on single industries. This is sometimes positioned as a problem, but it can also be seen as an opportunity. Primary resources remain important but so too do secondary and tertiary industries that have grown up in rural areas that offer educated workforces and high amenity services such as coastal tourism.

Following from the argument above, a productive and coordinated, multisectoral approach to rural education should, I think, include an analysis of particular rural communities and the bioregions within which they are located to determine a regional development and education strategy. This approach would generate strong links between educational service providers, other government departments, civil society and business interests to provide planning and educational services that relate to the established and emerging economy of the bioregion.

3. **Respect for established rural cultures.** In many rural education discussions, deficit framing is common. Rural places are often positioned as vestigial, peripheral, and generally as a problem space on the national economic and policy landscape. This is a highly problematic way of thinking about the well more than 95% of the national landmass that is not urban. Rural areas are clearly the location of the economic foundation of the nation, a national trust and a sacred responsibility as Aboriginal elders have been reminding settler population for generations.

The way that rural land and rural cultures have been demeaned and devalued is deeply problematic and it gives rise to a range of social, economic, political and environmental problems, not the least of which is the popularity of the politics corrosive xenophobic, and often racist resentment which, it must be said, is too well entrenched in rural Australia. I believe that much of this can be traced not to some kind of dispositional flaw in rural people, but to the way that they have been positioned historically by metrocentric policy and by urban elites and opinion-makers. To a large extent this is a national problem, which has its roots in both urban culture and in the way that education has not sufficiently reflected or supported the development and strengths of rural Australia and its people. This too, is a wicked problem, but I think anti-rural ideologies and habits need to be examined in much the same way that structural discrimination and bigotry against Aboriginal people are now under the microscope.

4. **Understanding the rural school advantage.** With respect to rural and remote schools, my research has shown that given their relative socioeconomic disadvantage, rural schools often “punch above their weight” achieving results that are better than similarly disadvantaged urban and suburban schools. It is probably, in my view that there is something going on in many rural schools that supports children and creates community and mitigates the influence poverty and distance from metropolitan services and opportunities. I think we need better community-sensitive qualitative research to understand better how and where this happens.

5. **Amenity and cultural promotion.** The most vibrant and resilient rural communities have managed to transition from a strong reliance and even dependency on a limited number of primary and secondary industries to a postproductivist and more complex economic structure that typically includes what Argent et al (2013) call high amenity or creative industry affordances. What this means is that certain rural locations have managed to turn their isolation, natural beauty (which virtually all rural, coastal or “bush” locations possess in some way), cultural uniqueness and other assets into economic advantage. In some instances creative professionals and artists choose these places for their activities, sometime because of the low cost of real estate and labour as well as because of their natural amenities.

I would argue that any contemporary reconceptualization of rural education should include the commonplace emphasis on STEM subjects and producing a rural labour force that is prepared for traditional rurally-based industries such as mining, farming and forestry, but also, that attention should be paid to the creative and cultural industries as well as to tourism. It is my sense as well that there is a need for preparing workers for

conservation and ecological stewardship forms of work which will be crucial to Australia in the coming generations as rural areas become the flashpoint for climate change and food security. The work of Aboriginal Rangers is a good example of how young people in rural and remote parts of Australia can be engaged in doing the important work of caring for animals, land, air and water.

6. **The tyranny of space.** In just about any rural education conversation the problem of distance comes up. How can an educational governance authority balance the demand for the critical mass necessary to support quality programs, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels while at the same time providing access to quality educational programming for rural children who may live in sparsely populated areas? The school bus and paved roads provided part of the answer half a century ago, as did initiatives school consolidation, which became possible with better roads. This also led to centralization initiatives like the senior secondary colleges in Tasmania where it was argued that highly distributed population could only be effectively educated in centralized facilities where the necessary critical mass of students could be assembled via long distance bussing, boarding, and in more recent times through ICTs.

Today, it is generally understood that, in the case of Tasmania for example, that creating the conditions for critical mass through centralized colleges located in the cities of the state, has generated decades of persistent disadvantage for rural youth. This is clearly a “wicked problem” that has no easy solutions. For instance, there was, and still is, great hope that ICTs will shrink distance and provide better access for rural youth closer to home. And to a certain extent this has occurred. But the promise has not been fully realized and we require ongoing research into how to better use the established and emerging ICT tools in ways that improve access and outcomes.

The tyranny of space and the attendant problem of critical mass will never be entirely overcome in many rural situations, each of which is unique to physical and cultural geography. What I think is required (relating to point #1) is a coordinated approach to schooling that is less reliant on program standardization and which is more attuned to the idea that a school could be a multi-faceted institution in which the intellectual work of community development is undertaken. This would mean perhaps something a bit similar to the concept of the area school, which was pioneered from the 1930s, and 40s in Australia. What might such a concept look like today? One thing is certain, we now live in a connected world where the tyranny of space can be dealt with differently and even turned to advantage as it has done in many places with tourism and niche agriculture. How might rural schools both respond to the affordances of the local labour market while at the same time connecting that economic situation to broader economic geographies and opportunities?

7. **Rural school leadership is crucial.** There is also ample research to demonstrate that when rural schools are well administered and well led, that teachers are more likely to be retained and educational outcomes improve. There has been some limited work on rural leadership in Australia, but none of it has been coordinated. Given that Professor Halsey is an expert in this area, I will not elaborate further here, but simply say that a

national rural leadership consortium would be a positive development for the development of professional learning for rural school leaders and for the development of policy for rural education across the Commonwealth.

8. **Rural teacher education is one key to retaining educators and insuring quality in rural schools.** Finally, there is good international evidence that demonstrates that when teacher education candidates are provided with programming that addresses the positive aspects and challenges of rural teaching and rural communities openly and honestly that beginning teachers are more likely to experience success in rural locations. Whether or not specialized programs for rural teaching is a good idea should be the subject of robust debate that should include all of the questions, issues and tensions articulate above.

9. **Coexistence.** I think all of the above represent an argument for coexistence and cooperation. It seems to have been the belief that rural places would be emptied by modernizing influences and the drift to the cities would be the only story of note in modernity. As this narrative has gained traction, rural schools and services have been shuttered, populations have diminished and as the percentage of Australians living in the country have declined, it has become easier to forget and ignore rural education. In the process, rural schools have often become either specialized training sites for creating vocational workers or alternatively as engines of outmigration as many rural scholars have concluded. But rural places remain, some decline others stagnate, and some others thrive.

Many areas that can be considered rural and remote have high concentrations of Aboriginal Australians who are deeply connected to the land. The same is true of settler populations who have lived in some rural areas for many generations. This generates both tensions and the possibility of mutual aid. As some rural areas become home to newcomers, some of whom are artists, tourist operators or workers, retirees, refugees, entrepreneurs and creative industry people, the complexity, diversity and thus the resilience of a rural place grows. This should be promoted through policy (for instance immigrant and refugee settlement policy) that is sensitive to the way that diversity and coexistence has always been the engine of growth for Australia just as the rural landscape remains the backbone of the nation. Keeping it strong, vibrant, resilient, and well educated is a challenge that will require effort, deliberation and resources.

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