

GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL THEME ISSUE: LEARNING AS RURAL ENGAGEMENT (Part 2)

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For John (Jack) Moriarty
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*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too...*
John Keats, "Ode to Autumn"

The outstanding feature of Radcliffe-Brown's mature work is its singlemindedness....His strength lay in his clarity, his certitude, and his dedication. These enabled him to win disciples.
Kuper (1996, p. 63)

ARTICLES IN PART 2

This is the second half of a two-part special theme issue of *Education in Rural Australia* devoted to the theme *Learning As Rural Engagement* (see also Danaher, Danaher & Moriarty, 2004). The issue has been concerned with identifying and analysing, across a range of contexts and sites, some of the dilemmas encountered in promoting education in rural areas as well as a number of strategies that have proven to be effective in engaging with those dilemmas. As we elaborate below, these dilemmas and strategies resonate and articulate with many of the concerns and aspirations of the readers of this journal, including the involvement by education in strengthening networks and relationships in rural communities and the very sustainability of those communities.

This complex and at times contested relationship between learning and rural engagement has been taken up by the authors in this and the other half of this theme issue in multiple ways. What has linked and given coherence to their disparate and respective contributions have been their responses to three key questions (a point that we also elaborate below):

- What is the current and likely future sustainability of rural communities?
- What is the potential contribution of learning to engaging the members of those communities?
- What does that contribution indicate about the aims and relevance of rural education in the early 21st century?

The first article in this second half of the double theme issue, by Robyn Henderson, examines the educational access and experiences of the children of itinerant farm workers in a North Queensland rural community. Henderson argues that the stories that circulate about the workers' seasonal influx into that community are suffused with negative assumptions about their educational and parenting aspirations and skills that derive from an enduring hostility towards itinerancy – encapsulated in the vivid image of “an invasion of green-stained farm workers from outer space(s)”. At the same time, she contends that learning can articulate with rural engagement by means of the school and its officers highlighting the crucial contribution to the local economy and to local diversity that itinerancy makes.

In the second article, the first of three by staff members of the Gladstone campus of Central Queensland University, Lyn Hughes reports on the impact of a specialised program designed to give senior secondary students information and experiences about early childhood education. Hughes posits a vital connection between the program's perceived effectiveness and the significance of multiple partnerships in giving students as much information as possible in order to make informed decisions about career directions. She argues that such programs and partnerships can contribute effectively to the sustainability of regional and rural communities.

Helen Holden uses the third article to present the results of a qualitative, phenomenographic study of the influence of persistence and performance in motivating first year students at the university. She uses those results to elicit distinct persisting and performing behaviours, which link in turn with students' motivation levels and course and program completion rates. Holden concludes that regional campuses of universities have particular opportunities for fostering such positive behaviours and hence for enhancing the sustainability of the rural communities in which they are located.

In the fourth article, Val Cleary investigates the integration of teacher practicum experiences into two undergraduate literacy education courses and the role that that integration played in developing the pre-service teachers' knowledge base. Cleary adduces the findings of research conducted with the pre-service teachers and their supervising teachers to assert the positive impact of partnerships linking the regional university campus and local schools on both groups' understandings as well as on the region's future sustainability. This can be achieved in part by the graduating teachers being more likely to work in their local community and to act as advocates for the university campus where they had first encountered those effective partnerships.

Emma Motley, Tony Rossi and Sheila King focus on the perceptions of professional development held by early career teachers working in regional and rural schools in Central Queensland. The authors use the constructed narrative of a composite teaching principal to identify the challenges in and opportunities for such professional development by educational personnel in regional areas. They conclude by highlighting

both the importance of this kind of professional development being made more widely and sustainably available in such areas and some possible strategies for achieving this outcome.

In the sixth and final article, Abdurrahman Umar of the National Teachers' Institute in Kaduna, Nigeria presents a cogent and compelling critique of the provision of primary education in some rural communities in his country. On the basis of an analysis of teaching of the four core subjects in the National Curriculum, he asserts that, while the numbers of schools and teachers in rural areas has increased, significant rural–urban inequalities endure in the quality of educational provision. Consequently Umar argues that, despite potential and rhetoric, rural schooling functions to reproduce wider social inequalities in Nigeria. While this journal is focused on rural education in Australia, the publication of Umar's article here provides us with a welcome opportunity to discern and analyse similarities and differences between rural educational provision, and also potential synergies between rural educational researchers, in our two countries.

The issue concludes with a response to the double theme issue being provided by Will Letts and Tracey Simpson, who link some of the concerns communicated in the 12 articles with the interests of the readers of *Education in Rural Australia*.

REFLECTIONS

Without wishing to detract from that response, it is appropriate that as guest editors we present our own reflections on the articles making up the two halves of this special theme issue of the journal. Those articles have traversed a diversity of locations: North, Central and south-western Queensland; eastern and central Australia; south-western Western Australia; and Nigeria. They have focused on multiple sectors: primary schooling; secondary schooling; community learning; technical and further education; and university education. They have also canvassed several contemporary educational issues, ranging from partnerships of varying kinds to professional development to inequities of access and provision to itinerancy and mobility. Likewise they have deployed a number of organising concepts, including capacity building, social entrepreneurship, social agents, discourses, social capital, multiliteracies, itinerancy, sustainability and equality of educational opportunity.

One particularly striking *leitmotif* that appears in a number of the articles is the strangely ambivalent and ambiguous function played by formal education in rural areas. On the one hand, especially in the articles dealing with partnerships, education emerged as a strong contender for the roles of defender and sustainer of regional and rural communities and of major contributor to their future survival. This point links explicitly with the proposition that education is distinctively, even uniquely, placed to build capacity and augment social capital in those communities. On the other hand, articles such as those relating to secondary schooling in Western Australia, mobile show people and farm workers in Queensland and rural locations in Nigeria paint a very different picture, in which formal and traditional educational provision is actually complicit with negative social forces of discrimination and exclusion. Given the enduring power of the urban–rural binary (Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2003), this is a timely reminder that education is not always innocent and productive in its effects, and that it is never natural or neutral in its constitution and construction.

In relation to the three organising questions articulated above that have framed the 12 articles making up this double theme issue, the responses to the questions are as diverse and richly nuanced as the articles. We have space to make only three specific points that we feel nevertheless signify both the urgency of the questions and the importance of the answers. Firstly, the future sustainability of the several rural communities in Australia and Nigeria portrayed in the articles, and the potential contribution of learning to engaging the members of those communities, are linked integrally and intimately with much broader forces operating at regional, national and global levels, so that it is neither possible nor desirable for those communities to conduct themselves as if they were separate from the complex interconnections that underpin the contemporary world. Secondly, and seemingly paradoxically, that sustainability and that contribution will depend ultimately on the energies, motivations and resources of the members of those rural communities themselves – and a number of the articles have identified the positive outcomes that occur when those energies, motivations and resources are in alignment and operating effectively. Thirdly, both these points underscore the continuing vital relevance of rural education in the early 21st century – particularly when its aims are directed explicitly at working strategically at this interface between the macro and the micro.

For us, then, the 12 articles in this double theme issue of *Education in Rural Australia* have made a timely and significant contribution to the ongoing debate about rural education: what, where and for whom it is, how it intersects with other forces of social action and power and what it augurs for the future survival and sustainability of rural communities. Learning as rural engagement, and the dilemmas and strategies that underpin it, are useful markers and signposts from which we can take our bearings and refresh our spirits as we traverse our respective and shared trajectories as rural educators at the beginning of a new century and millennium.

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