



Considering Diversity in Educational Research that Explores School-Community Relationships

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* explores school-community relationships from a diversity perspective. The contributions originated in presentations delivered as part of the European Educational Research Association's Network 14 sessions at the annual European Conference in Educational Research in August 2023. The papers present perspectives from a wide range of contexts: from Asia and Australia to Europe and South America.

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Editorial

In this special issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, international scholars provide insights about school-community relationships in rural contexts by considering the broad concept of diversity in educational research. The origins of this special issue lie in the Special Call of the European Educational Research Association Network 14 for the European Conference in Educational Research held in Glasgow, Scotland, in August 2023. Network 14, one of the 34 networks of the European Educational Research Association, provides a forum for the development of research-informed knowledge in the field of Education, with a specific interest in the relationships between communities, families, and schools. The call unified the network's key research mission with the conference theme: valuing diversity. It invited contributions on school-community relationships in all locations, examining diversity as a driver and/or mediator for change. A selection of those contributions is published in this special issue.

Indeed, this special issue gathers papers that explore where diversity matters (e.g., educational settings, place, space) and highlights how it challenges homogeneous systems (cf. Biesta et al., 2022). Our collection of international scholars come from Australia, Brazil, Chile, Indonesia, Nepal, Norway, Peru, Scotland, Spain, and Switzerland. They share insights into (1) how cooperation or partnerships between schools and/or other organisations can be initiated and sustained to foster the development of more inclusive communities, (2) how homogeneous systems adversely affect school-community relationships, and (3) how the promotion of diversity may have a positive influence on these relationships.

These contributions often build on existing work. They challenge commonsense understandings about binaries relating to place (Corbett & White, 2014; Cuervo, 2016), move beyond deficit notions of groups to ensure more inclusive educational and community approaches (Gouwens &

Henderson, 2021), and problematise notions of community, place and identity (Pini & Mayes, 2015; Tatebe, 2021). Some rethink and rewrite curriculum (Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021; McPherson et al., 2017), and all promote opportunities for teaching and learning across communities (Hogarth, 2019).

The first article, the *Complexity of Managing Diverse Communication Channels in Family-School Relations in Switzerland as Seen by Parents and Schools*, give us some insights on the interaction between parents and schools via digital technologies in eight schools, including two rural schools, across Switzerland in autumn/winter 2021. Although Sonja Beeli Zimmermann, Melodie Burri, Anne-Sophie Ewald and Evelyne Wannack record that the diversity of communication channels between schools and families is particularly embraced by parents. They show that communication remains “predominantly ... one-way information (schools informing parents) ... rather than dialogue,” regardless of the location of the school.

In their article *Organising Inclusive Transitions in VET Education in a Rural Community in Norway*, Anna Rapp and Agneta Knutas allow us to reflect on school-community relationships in rural settings. In Norway (as elsewhere in the world), transitions from education to work are often perceived as more challenging in rural areas than in urban areas, due to limited resources. This perception is questioned by the researchers in their analysis of the interaction of the world of education and that of work in a village located in central Norway. It is from their systematic examination of the diverse forms of collaborations among the “actors in the network” (i.e., the students, the school, the training office and the local companies or institutions) that they are able to explain how “the organising of rural VET supported students’ crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation.”

The article that follows contributes to the literature that stresses the importance of considering elements of the territorial dimension in curricular materials to allow “rural students, teachers and their communities to feel represented” in these materials. In their article *Educational Practices and Teaching Materials in Spanish Rural Schools from the Territorial Dimension*, Núria Carrete-Marín, Laura Domingo-Peñafiel and Núria Simó-Gil highlight that this consideration exists, but it “is not identified as a priority” in the survey responses of Spanish rural teachers. In addition, they point out that the lack of materials containing local knowledges and inadequate training may prevent the delivery of this desirable curriculum.

Salpa Shrestha and Megh Raj Dangal, in their paper entitled *Bridging the Gap Between Communities in Nepal using Participatory Action Research*, document how education equity and social justice in a Nepalese rural community have been fostered from a collaboration between some parents of out-of-school children and an academic team from Kathmandu University over a period of nine months. They detail the stages of the process, allowing them to highlight not only the spectrum of perspectives, experiences and cultural nuances among the community, but also how the collective action of these parents debunked discourse surrounding educational deficits and raised community engagement and awareness in education matters.

The final two articles transport us to South America. In her article *Critical Pedagogies for Reappraising Indigenous Knowledge and Diversity in Rural Peru: The Voices of Two Rural Teachers*, Silvia Espinal-Meza invites us to explore the practices of social justice through critical pedagogies from the narratives of two teachers located in rural schools in highly disadvantaged Peruvian places. She shows how the use of the Indigenous language (Quechua) in activities involving the arts, dance and storytelling at schools could help students, parents and communities to value and reappraise their cultural heritage. By doing so, she gives us the opportunity to think about how (local) practices can “embrace diversity” offered by the place and “break traditional ways of teaching and learning within the complex scenarios of educational inequalities” in the spirit of Darder (2015), Freire (1974) and Freire and Macedo (1995).

Elizabeth dos Santos Braga gives us a vivid appreciation of place and space in the periphery of São Paulo, Brazil, where rural and urban are not separate, but are overlapping concepts. In her article entitled *Space, Place and Territory: Life Narratives about the Constitution of Subjects as Transforming Agents*, she analyses the dynamics of transformation through the excerpts of interviews with two local activists. She makes us aware of how their experiences and perceptions of the place have converted them into environmental agents or transformative activists as per Stetsenko (2017).

The Rural Connections piece, written by Anne Paterson, Loreto Abarzúa-Silva, Moch. Imam Machfudi and Robyn Henderson, captures the richness of an encounter between four researchers from different parts of the world. Their exchange resonates very well with all of us willing to go beyond the urban-rural dichotomy and to think about how rural education should be represented in research. Their shared experiences and reflections remind us about how the diversity of positive narratives offered by rural education research can debunk deficit discourses.

The following article in this issue is the transcript of a conversation between the Regional Education Commissioner, Ms Fiona Nash, and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access, Professor John McKendrick, hosted by the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* at the end of February 2024. From their perspectives, both candidly discussed the importance of responding to the tertiary education needs of regional, rural and remote communities.

Finally, in this special issue, John Guenther has written the review of *the Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* by Azano et al. (2022). This handbook is an engaging collection of scholarly works on rural education in the United States. It provides an accessible representation of current and emerging trends.

To summarise, the contributing authors explore some of the challenges and opportunities of working with diversity in rural education across a wide range of contexts. Although their insights are specific to the particular contexts of their research, there are several synergies across the articles. These offer food for thought for building effective relationships and collaborations, fostering communication and dialogue, and finding ways of valuing and using local knowledges and the cultural and linguistic heritage of rural areas.

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