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EDITORIAL: RURAL SCHOOLS AS HUBS FOR THE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITIES

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This special issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* presents 10 papers on the theme of rural schools as hubs for the socio-educational development of communities. The idea for a collection of papers on this theme originated in a large, multi-paper symposium presented at the European Conference on Educational Research in August 2016 in Dublin, Ireland. The symposium brought together researchers from more than ten countries and three continents, as part of the European Educational Research Association's Network 14, which is a forum for discussing educational research that relates to communities, families and schools. The symposium provided a context for deep discussions amongst a group of international researchers, with a focus on rural schools, rural communities and the relationships that enable change within those communities. This special issue moves from the conversations of the conference to written papers, bringing multiple voices and diverse views to a wider audience.

In this introduction, we begin by outlining the thinking that underpins this special issue. We then provide a brief introduction to the articles, before handing over to the 15 researchers who offer insights into their research projects and some of their thinking about the socio-educational development of communities in rural areas.

Framing socio-educational development in rural communities

Etymologically related to the concepts of growth, increment and progress, the idea of development, in its relationship to the history of humanity and communities, and more specifically in its relationship with territories, has been at the core of the identification of asymmetries between those who are inside—and therefore develop—and those who are outside—and therefore do not develop. From an economic point of view, it is possible to clearly identify the consequences of this centralist and materialistic definition of development, namely in terms of the disruption of local communities, the marginalisation of people and territories, and the deterioration of natural, social and cultural heritages.

For a long time, understandings of the rural have emerged in opposition to those of the urban, referring to eminently agricultural spaces, non-industrialised and within rigid geographic boundaries. This oppositionist and dichotomous logic is both problematic and limiting, especially in terms of how it can be built on the negative. Indeed, the urban is often regarded as everything the rural is not or cannot be (Corbett, 2009; Corbett & White, 2014; Green & Reid, 2014). This imagining of the rural in terms of deficits—connected with ideas of poverty, low levels of productivity and socio-cultural shortfalls—is related to development being conceptualised as mere economic growth, with rural areas being commonly envisaged as devoid of ideas, achievements, projects and organisations (Ashley & Maxwell, 2001; Canário, 1998).

In light of the tenacity of such understandings, we think it is relevant and timely to engage in discussions that can contribute to an ideological shift. Rather than viewing rural communities from the outside, we want to allow local actors to reimagine contemporary rural contexts in relation to the world, in all its multi-functionality, mobility and (re)appropriation. In particular, we

want to identify socio-educational processes, including learning and the enhancement of endogenous skills, resources and knowledge, to demonstrate the power of local people and organisations to take action that may impact on their communities.

Some research has indicated the way that formal education is often “implicated in the depopulation and decline of rural areas” (Kelly, 2009, p. 1; see also Corbett, 2009). However, in this special issue, we are interested in the efforts of communities to foster learning and socio-educational development and to find ways that might ultimately build a “viability and sustainability” of place (Kelly, 2009, p. 2). Indeed, Corbett’s (2009) comments about his experiences of teaching in rural places highlighted that “many of the students ... were not resistant to learning, but too often were resistant to school” (p. 2). To this end, we are thinking about education in its fullness, rather than focusing only on schooling.

Indeed, we recognise that the impetus for socio-educational community development might not always originate in schools. Despite considerable evidence of the entrepreneurial practices of many teachers (Chand & Misra, 2009), we want to consider the concept of “educational” as differentiating itself from what is strictly “scholastic” in two fundamental aspects: in its formats and in its temporalities. Because such efforts are eminently trans- or multi-institutional, or they do not necessarily obey exogenously or arbitrarily defined curricula or agendas, we hoped that the discussion would consider shared and multi-directional learning processes, those that favour intergenerational dynamics, and those that seek to occupy “dead” or neglected space-times. In this sense, we did not want to limit the discussion to one concerned exclusively with rural schools, but we wanted the concept of “educational” to enable consideration of projects and initiatives that summon the contribution of a range of locally-relevant organisations, such as municipal or regional governments, companies, citizens’ associations and other groups associated with the community. Indeed, as Chand and Misra (2009) pointed out, there is a potential for schools and schooling more generally to play important roles in mobilising action in rural communities. However, there is also a potential for other organisations to play crucial roles.

As platforms for their communities’ socio-educational development, rural schools and the rural contexts within which they are situated are “true microcosms—not in the sense that they replicate, to scale, the structures” that can be found at the macro level, “but because they present themselves as contexts that are fraught with specific complexities and diversity, governed by their own organizations and relational logics” (Lúcio, 2011, p. 87). We are thus considering dynamic processes, framed by what can be identified as community development, building on the specific needs and interests of local populations and offering adequate, locally-based alternative directions. In this sense, the process of change is materialised and led by the community itself, in a cooperative, committed and integrated approach. Local actors reflect on their daily actions, operating across at least three levels:

- diagnosis: analysing what is missing, what is not working, what might be done differently, and so on;
- programming and executing: defining goals and resources, deciding on action, implementing;
- evaluating: predicting or discussing the possibility of broadening dissemination mechanisms, reprogramming strategies, reformulating premises and aims.

In addition to being a space of culture(s) and memories, the rural context is a space for living and experimenting. The rural world is heterogeneous and cultural diversity is one of its most enriching features (Anderson & Lonsdale, 2014; Ashley & Maxwell, 2001). It is also resilient, despite the difficulties that cross it, thanks to the will and the initiative of those who inhabit it (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012).

Identifying potential focus areas

The papers in this special issue demonstrate an interest in what Eriksen (2001) calls “studies of small-scale localities” (p. 58), thus favouring the construction of a comprehensive and complex glance at a range of aspects of community life, as well as a mapping of the “social organisation ... patterns of interaction and power relationships” (p. 4). Such mapping is useful for understanding who connects with whom—whether individuals or organisations—and in what ways those connections promote the identification of the social system and its collectively built understandings about the rural location, its history, its future and the fabric of interactions that are created and re-created. These shared understandings are neither mandatory nor entirely comprehensive. Building on the idea of the role of rural schools in the context of their communities, different questions arise:

- What can be learned in and from rural spaces?
- How do rural schools promote the participation and engagement of families and the community?
- How do local organisations summon the contribution/s of schools in rural contexts?
- How are rural schools promoting the appreciation and nurture of local memories and histories, the ability to think together about new ways of improving the territory, the use and potentiation of local (natural, cultural, human, tangible and intangible) resources, and democratic participation in decision-making?

Introducing the papers

The articles in this special issue have a common interest in communities and schools in rural areas. The collection is international, with contributions from Australia, Colombia, Ireland, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, the United States of America and Uruguay. The papers represent a diversity of contexts, people and community issues, as well as a wide range of perspectives, techniques of data collection and analysis, and conceptual and theoretical understandings. This collection, then, is defined by diversity and offers a multifaceted exploration of rural schools as socio-educational hubs.

The first cluster of papers investigates schooling. Using qualitative survey data, Laurence Lasselle investigates the perceptions of Scottish secondary school students who attend schools that service rural areas. In the Australian context, Robyn Henderson analyses the practices of a school where staff set out to welcome newly arrived students and their families into the school community and to strengthen school-community links. Peter E. Gill provides a descriptive case study of a small school on one of Ireland’s offshore islands, with a focus on how the school helps to ensure community sustainability and viability. From a social justice perspective, Ferney Cruz-Arcila investigates teachers’ narratives about English Language Teaching in rural areas of Colombia. His findings indicate that a number of factors conflict with the social development and well-being that are associated with English in current language policies. Monica Johansson explores the views of secondary school youth in rural Sweden about their participation and agency at local, regional and national levels of society.

The second cluster of papers demonstrates that school-community relationships are not always as we might expect. Jennifer Seelig investigates declining school enrolments in a rural school district in the USA, thereby exploring the impact of neoliberal education policies that prioritise institutional survival and pressure local residents to keep schools operating. Amy McPherson, Phillip Roberts and Natalie Downes identify the understandings about sustainability held by various community groups in an Australian context. They highlight the need for dialogue to ensure that schools and communities are not working at cross-purposes.

The third cluster of papers focuses on programs and/or projects that have made explicit school-community links. Joaquin Paredes-Labra, Inmaculada Tello and Alicia Kachinovsky examine the One Laptop Per Child program in Spain and how the ICT capabilities of schools and students can impact on parents and families, particularly those who sometimes experience exclusion. Joana Lúcio and Fernando Ilídio Ferreira describe a community partnership project that identified and analysed formal and informal local development initiatives in rural contexts in Portugal. In some cases, abandoned school buildings were rehabilitated and repurposed for community uses. In the final paper of this special issue, Judith A. Gouwens and Robyn Henderson discuss a family literacy program that operated in Midwestern USA. This program worked to enhance the literacies and educational opportunities of farm worker parents and their children through building insider knowledges and skills.

We hope you enjoy the diverse papers of this special issue.

Robyn Henderson and Joana Lúcio

Guest Editors

University of Southern Queensland, Australia, and Research Centre in Education (CIEd), University of Minho, Portugal

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