Small Schools Matter by Professor John Halsey

Small schools once dotted the educational landscape in great numbers, especially in rural Australia. For many, they were the engine room that drove the rise and rise of educational achievements and standards in this country.

It may come as a surprise to know that small schools are very much alive and well today. Using 100 enrolments or less to define a small school, there are still more than 2,000 of them in Australia. If the enrolment cut off is increased to 200, the number is over 4,200 or greater than 40% of Australia’s schools.

Recently, the South Australian government’s ‘razor gang’ advised that closing small schools should be considered to meet State Budget targets. Making parents pay for having their children travel on school buses was also proposed as a cost saving measure. For now, both have been given a reprieve. Instead, small school grants are going to be cut; is this just another way of achieving closures?

Why should we be concerned at closing small schools to meet budget targets?

Firstly, most small schools are in rural and remote communities where families have witnessed a steady decline of services that urban residents assume will ‘always be there’. As well, they often play a critical role in the economic life of a community by providing employment and through local purchases; also they are real evidence of community vibrancy. Put another way, few things signal that something very serious is happening to a country town like the closure of a school.

Secondly, small schools provide a crucial alternative to the rise and rise of super schools - history is littered with the casualties of ‘putting all your eggs in the one basket’ and ‘bigger is better’ thinking.

Thirdly, small schools have a relentless focus on the learning needs and achievements of their students which is enhanced because each is known individually as well as a member of a group.

Fourthly, small schools are of a scale that most- all? - people can relate to and feel relatively comfortably about doing so. As Putnam & Feldstein (2003, pp 275-278) report:

- researchers have repeatedly found that social capital is higher in smaller settings- smaller schools, smaller towns, smaller countries
- listening and trusting are easier in a smaller setting
- smaller groups also offer easier footholds for initial steps
- smaller is better for forging and sustaining connections

See A Collective Act Leading a small school published by ACER www.acerpress.com.au

Going to University by Dr Aaron Drummond

The Sidney Myer Chair in collaboration with the Flinders University Inspire Peer mentoring program and the Southern Knowledge Transfer have begun a project to create greater opportunities for southern school students to transition to university study.

A pilot mentoring project in Mount Compass Area and Seaford 6-12 Schools is underway to reduce the mystery of university and to emphasise that it is an option for all school students, no matter how much or little contact they have had with a university. The project has thus far included mentors visiting the schools as well as school students visiting the university. From all accounts these visits have been a resounding success, with students reporting that the university visits are enjoyable, fun and educational, and that the mentors have been helpful with their studies. Stay tuned for regular updates on how the project is progressing.
Data Collecting at Country Shows: a Snapshot

Over the past month we have travelled to two more country shows, one at Kadina and the other at Kimba. Each time we take with us the 'tools of our trade', being Flinders University banners, tablecloth, posters, information on courses, the surveys for data collection as well as some pens to give away by way of a 'thank you'. The most important 'tools' however, are the red frogs, snakes, minties, toffees, and other lollies! These are a big success with young and old, and with staff. The space in which we collect our data is different each time, as are our neighbours. We are creative in setting up this space and make sure that Flinders University has a colourful presence. Quite a few of our neighbours volunteer to do our survey, and we become good customers!

The day is spent talking with people and listening to what they have to say. It is good to have John wearing his akubra as this attracts attention, as do the cocktail tables that are laden with sweets, bookmarks and brochures.

We are thankful for the work that goes on 'behind the scenes' to make our stay smooth and welcoming. In particular we want to say 'thanks' to the Shows' Secretaries and staff who are always there to lend a helping hand.

Once the work of analysing the data has been completed we will go back to Kadina and Kimba for our next round of Community Conversations.

by Marja van Breda

In the News

Bush to benefit from flow of funds

Justine Ferrari Education Writer

RURAL schools will get the first bite of spending on education initiatives under the minority Gillard government, with one-third of funding quarantined to be spent in the bush. Rural education experts yesterday warned against simply rolling out the same programs across the nation, saying measures that work in the big cities will not necessarily be effective in small communities. In its agreement with the two rural independents, Labor reprioritized spending of two key policies announced during the election campaign, allocating about a third of the money to paying rewards to schools and for school autonomy in regional Australia. The agreement notes that one out of every three Australians lives in a regional community, appearing to justify the allocation. Education Minister Simon Crean yesterday confirmed similar arrangements would apply to specific education programs, rather than base school funding. "As the agreement document states, under a Labor minority government, regional Australia will be the first to receive funding for key education initiatives and the funding will be distributed proportionally," he said. Rural education experts welcomed the influence on policy of Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott as "an opportunity to redress some of the imbalance" in services and resources between rural and urban communities. The challenge facing the government is to reverse the trend that the further away a school is from a large population centre, the worst its student results. Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities at Flinders University, John Halsey, called on the government to develop policies specifically for rural schools, saying the market forces in urban communities did not exist in small towns with one or at most a couple of schools. "We need to find cleverer ways to provide access to local schools, we need to become better at thinking what really works in rural and remote communities. Its not simply a matter of scaling down or rolling out things that work in large population centres," he said. Professor Halsey said it was time to rethink the models for schools and consider forming clusters or groups of small schools that might cover a vast area, but can share resources to ensure they are able to offer a full curriculum. "Not everybody has to teach physics but we have to make sure every kid has access to physics," he said. Rural Education Forum of Australia chief executive Gary Allen said the biggest issue was the lack of breadth in the curriculum. "Providing music is taken for granted in urban schools but the issue of how you provide music in rural and remote schools is difficult. There's now some exciting opportunities with the internet and we'd like to see some funding in those areas," he said.
Space and History by Professor John Halsey

Gaining fresh traction on complex issues like sustaining, and indeed expanding education in rural communities, is sometimes assisted by coming at a problem from a different perspective. Below is a brief extract offered in this spirit from my keynote address to the 2010 Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) conference held at the University of the Sunshine Coast:

“Soja (1989) opens his work on the role of space in social critical theory by asserting that history has dominated how contexts and events are read. Put another way, “a sequentially unfolding narrative predisposes the reader to think historically, making it difficult to see the text as a map, a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic” (p.1). My point, however, is not that an historical reading of text has diminished or made invisible a spatial rendering of text, or vice versa, but that taken together, working together, space and history, spatiality and historicity, are more likely than not to unearth fresh ways of thinking of and doing something practical on the ground about rural communities, education and sustainability. Or as Soja (1996) later argues, “there is a growing awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical, and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence (p.3).”

Space- the natural and physical properties, and spatiality- socially produced space, foreground two critical perspectives of place in a locational and possibilities sense. Firstly there is what Cocklin and Dibden refer to as natural capital—“natural resources, ecosystem services and the aesthetics or beauty of nature” (p.4). Space also refers to dimensions, scale, and evokes relativities. The physical properties of space highlight the ‘givens’ of a location, an area, which, while ‘open’ to degrees of manipulation and modification, are nevertheless ‘starting points’. Spatiality on the other hand makes apparent the pervasive sense in which signifiers in the physical world like boundaries, use designations of land,

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The Ins and Outs of Quantitative Research

Glossary of Terms

Dr Aaron Drummond

This article will serve as a glossary of terms to help you understand the basic terms used by us ‘numbers’ researchers.

• Data: Plural. These data show.
• Datum: Singular. This datum shows.
• Likert Scale: A scale consisting of five or seven numbers indicating how much a statement is agreed with (1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree). Named after Rensis Likert, its inventor.
• Likert-type Scale: Any scale that is similar to a Likert scale, with polarised response categories that are not about how much a statement is agreed with. For example, perhaps instead of strongly disagree to strongly agree, not at all important to very important is used.
• Mean (M): The average response across all participants.
• Mode: The most common response across all participants.
• Quantitative Research: Any research that seeks to use numbers to describe the world. This includes: 60% of people agreed; people took 25 seconds to answer the question; 374 people responded to the questionnaire.
• Qualitative Research: Research that focuses on building understanding through collecting and analysing opinion and descriptive data. For example: Harry said, “Education is great!” (NB. Indications of how many people share this view is actually a rudimentary form of quantitative research).
• Mixed Methods: Research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods.
• Standard Deviation (SD): A measure of how close

(Continued on page 4)
Vision and Mission

- Vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to the long-term sustainability of Australia.
- It is critical that people who live and work in rural and remote Australia have access to high quality, relevant and affordable education, training and care at all ages and stages of life.
- It is essential that the people who live and work in urban contexts and provide policy advice to governments and others, and who design and manage a myriad of programs intended to benefit country people and communities, deeply understand rural.

(Continued from page 3)

transport corridors, and the built environments for services in a rural community for example are very much the result of decisions, of political processes, of traditions, of conventions, of responses to change. Put differently, the resultant spaces (physical and virtual) are constructed through complex interactive processes.

Turning to history, two fundamental questions endemic to it: what happened and why, are especially pertinent because each is a generator of a raft of further questions like: from whose perspective, what kinds of evidence are used to construct ‘the version’, over what period of time, and for what purposes are the histories being constructed: to justify previous decisions, to prepare the groundwork for future action, to explicate the dominant perspectives which frame the context, and so forth.

The point I am trying to make is that history is not just about working on and with events, fixtures and dates to form a linear narrative of a ‘this happened and then that happened’ kind. Rather history has the potential to alert one to macro and micro global and local issues, events, and shaping themes that create contexts for certain kinds of decisions rather than others to be made. Blending the conceptual contributions of space and spatiality with those of history as briefly outlined, I believe is a potentially productive way for developing options for rural sustainability centred on education, broadly conceived.

Full transcript available on website.

(Continued from page 3)

responses lie to the mean. A smaller number here means that individual responses were generally closer to the mean.

Now, some basic facts about the responses we are getting from people regarding how important they believe rural education and communities are. 699 people from Karoonda, Kadina and Kimba completed a short survey on rural education and communities. Their mean age was 47 years, with a standard deviation of 18 years, indicating a large amount of variance in the ages of the people that answered. Participants scored a mean of 6.5 (SD = .6) on five seven point likert-type scales assessing the importance of accessing educational services in their local community. These data demonstrate that rural communities are convinced that access to local education and information communication technology to support their learning is (almost) essential.

Until next time,
Strength in numbers,

dr. a.

Upcoming Events

- Loxton Country Show
  3rd-4th October 2010
- Burra Country Show
  9th October 2010
- Naracoorte Country Show
  16th October 2010
- Kadina and Kimba Community Conversations
  November 2010 TBC
- ASRI Conference— 22 November 2010 at Flinders University
  Pedagogy that makes a difference
  Prof John Halsey presents Farm Fair Voices: Mapping
  Rural Education and Communities in South Australia. Dr Aaron Drummond presents Implementing the National Curriculum in Rural, Regional and Remote Schools, and Distance Education
- Summit 2011 : Rural Futures Matter: A Sustainable Australia. Held at Flinders University 21-23 September 2011. For information visit the website or contact Marja on 08 8201 7529.

We’re on the web!
www.flinders.edu.au/education/rural