Developing a Rural Compass: Recalibrating for Success

An overview of rural education policy in Australia

Abstract: Although home to over 32% of the nation, regional Australia is often overlooked in terms of research, planning and investment. This is a call to recalibrate the rural compass for policy decisions in Australia. It is timely as the OECD launches [Learning Compass 2030,](#) its new ['Global Competence Framework'](#) and '*global competence*' PISA measure. It is also timely given the soon to be released Australian Independent [Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education](#) (424)

Rural, Regional & Remote

Discussion around rural, regional and remote education tends to focus on challenges, barriers and disadvantage. Reid (2017) refers to 'persistent and entrenched locational disadvantaged' within rural areas highlighting that in such contexts 'education is both crucially important and inexorably difficult' (p.88). The OECD also highlights the importance of 'context and competencies' suggesting *global competencies are critical skills for students in being able to navigate in time and social space so as to shape their own future.* The new PISA test is the OECD's first step to measure global competencies of 15 year olds around the globe. https://www.oecd.org/education/Global-competency-for-an-inclusive-world.pdf. It will be interesting to see if this measure reveals a different perspective of 'rural achievement' compared to current PISA outcomes. The recent PISA test 'collaborative problem solving', saw Australia rank 10th out of 72 countries compared to a relative lack of improvement on the other traditional PISA tests.

Common issues related to 'rural' education over the years include provision and access of quality education, tyranny of distance, curriculum enrichment, access to technology, higher education pathways, subject choice, teacher turnover and expertise, cultural clashes, relevance and appropriateness of curriculum, inherent costs and social environment and emotional well-being. The latest Australian

government review investigating; the gap in educational achievement, effectiveness and appropriateness of current modes of education delivery, opportunities to help students move from school to further study, training and employment, will add to the wealth of reviews and reports that currently exit on rural education in Australia. Yet possibly yield little new knowledges in its findings. https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education.

A 'rural compass' is offered to guide future policy, media coverage, government reports, rhetoric and key peoples' voices. Traditionally, a 'compass' refers to an essential tool in the bush or ocean used for navigation and orientation purposes showing direction relative to geographic or astrological signposts. A 'rural compass' is a research analysis instrument used to orientate and provide policy direction relative to geographical points - capturing education, economic, political and socio-cultural signposts. Little recalibration of the rural compass has occurred within ongoing waves of educational reform in Australia despite an ongoing number of reviews and reports during periods of decentralization, corporatization; standardization; and recent move to personalization of education.

What has remained constant, are the key policy threads emerging within policy landscapes around the globe highlighting the importance of people, philosophy, place, processes and power (5Ps) (Ledger et al 2015).

The 5Ps provides a research tool to critique policies and strategic plans. In this case, Australian State education policy documents. The 5Ps build on Reid et al (2010) *Rural Social Space Model* – social, economic and environmental dimensions and Balls (2015) policy analysis model. A rural lens using the 5Ps embedded within a rural compass may alleviate previous metro-centric policy decisions and discourse.

Fig 1: Ledgers' 5Ps Rural Lens

The Key Policy Threads (5Ps): Compass Check Points

An examination of key policy threads embedded in State Education policy documents reveal important emergent themes, policy change agents and possible blockers.

- **Philosophy** – underlying educational policy waves, discourses and actions. **Place** – denotes both context (Reid et al 2010) and consciousness (Rizvi, 2010).
- **People** – who are the significant players at each policy level? Who is informing policy decisions? Are the voices of rural children heard?
- **Processes** – relates to managing and facilitating change, the translation of policy into practice including implementation processes and funding.
- **Power** –powerful voices, privileged states and power inequities resulting from the combination of people, processes and philosophy.

The **philosophy** driving current education policy in Australia is fundamentally economic. Australia is well entrenched within the wave of 'Standardisation' in education policy reform similar to the US and UK. Within the last decade Australia has introduced a National Curriculum, National Professional Standards for Teachers; National Program Standards for Initial Teacher Education and National Registration of teachers. Unfortunately, national policy directives are driven largely by metro-centric perspectives and discourse. The following maps show the population imbalance in Australia and at the same time highlight the large areas of rural, regional and remote contexts.
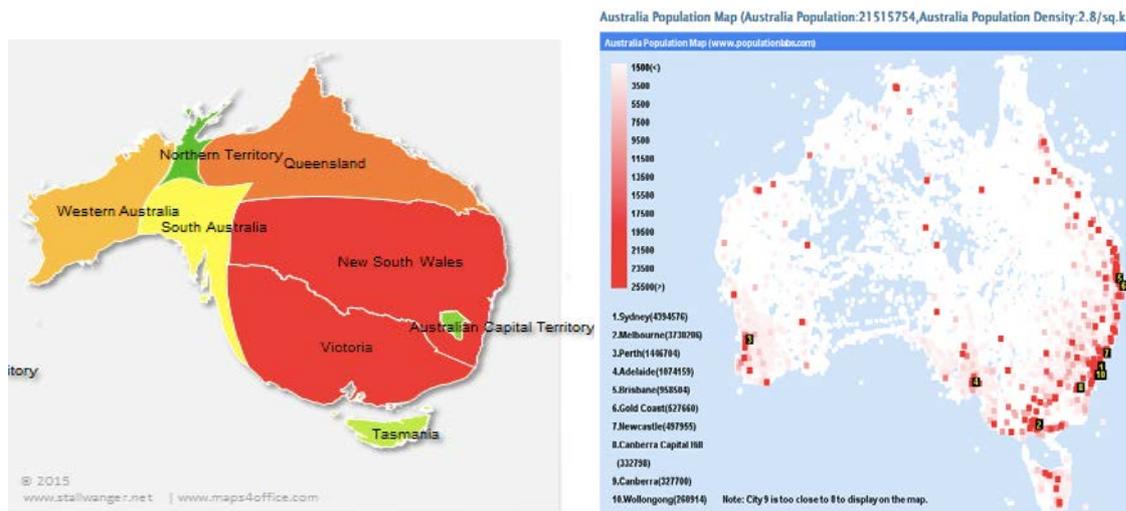
Figure 2: An Australian imbalance - population and policy

People & Place: With Australia being one of the most urbanized countries in the world with 66% of people living in capital cities and over 80% of the population living within 50km of the coast, it is no wonder issues related to rural, regional and remote education are often ignored and not represented in policy decisions or future planning. However, bureau of statistic data also highlight the importance of regional Australia. The rural regions are Australia's major source of export earnings 67%, regional Australia plays a critical role in tourism 45%, and regional economies are diverse and concentrated in the services, health education and infrastructure. Statistics also highlight if students study in regional areas they tend to remain in regional areas after graduation whereas 74% of regional students who leave to study in urban institutes are unlikely to return. The causes, consequences and challenges faced by rural urban migration for education purposes is one of many issues requiring further investigation and investment in Australian.

A diverse population live in Australia. Indigenous Australians represent 3.3% of the total population with approximately 60% living in New South Wales or Queensland. The Northern Territory has the largest proportion of its population as indigenous (30%) compared to other states with less than 4.7%. The number of indigenous population has increased by 17% since 2011. https://theconversation.com/census-2016-whats-changed-for-indigenous-australians-79836
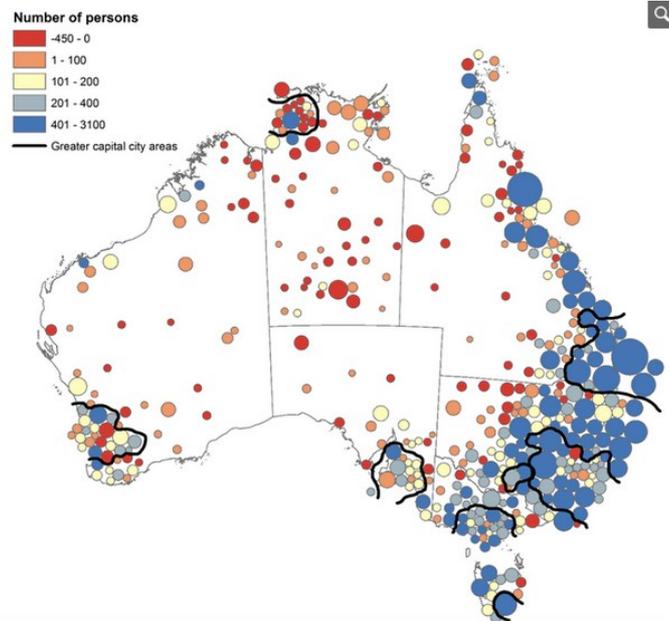
Figure 3: Australian Indigenous population

Australian Rural Education Compass

Process: An interrogation of State Policy documents across Australia shows alignment with the national education agenda's focus on excellence, high quality, successful learners, high performance, accountability and equity (Hargreaves & Fullen, 2012). However, it also reveals ambiguity in relation to the terms rural, regional and remote, for example, rural in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is significantly different to rural in the Northern Territory in terms of geographic, economic and social dimensions. 73% of Northern Territory schools are located in remote areas and 47% of total population of students in the state compared to Canberra with 99% of total population in the capital city.

In terms of language and discourse, there was silence and deficit in the documents. Only two of the 7 State policy documents mentioned rural, regional, remote or geography specifically. With the appointment of a Director of Rural, Regional and Remote the state of Queensland specifically address 'rural' as an outcome in their strategic education plan. Victoria embeds rural in digital access, vocational education and early childhood contexts. New South Wales mentions rural in relation to post-secondary students. Most states mention distance education and indigenous education however do not mention the terms regional, rural or remote. Conversely, the policy documents revealed a subtle move toward a more global outlook: New South Wales – confident capable global citizens; ACT- personalize the policy with the

mantra 'I am confident, my future is exciting'. Northern Territory – ensures equity by giving every child opportunity to engage, grow & achieve. Queensland – prepares students for the world of tomorrow, today; South Australia – students are equipped to engage globally; Tasmania – want their learners to succeed as connected, resilient, creative and curious thinkers; Victoria – a focus on personal and practical skills to live the lives they want to live; Western Australia – aims for every child to be provided with a high-quality school education – whatever their ability, wherever they live, whatever their background. Innovatively, the commissioner for children and youth people WA has recently captured the voices of students in rural and metro about school and learning to help guide future policy directives.

https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/2763/speaking-out-about-school-and-learning.pdf

Power. A range of power inequities, discourse discrepencies and silences were revealed in state policy documents. The history, geography, economics and cultures that produce the 'rural social spaces' teachers, students and parents inhabit can constrain or enable successful implementation of policy (Comber, 2015), yet little acknowledgement of these factors were included, particularly teacher preparation.

https://theconversation.com/whats-ahead-for-education-policy-in-2018-89376

Conclusion

An interrogation of Australian education policy documents using the 5Ps identified powerful voices and silences related to rurality. It reveals the power of language embedded in the rural rhetoric and recommends recalibration of the rural compass to disrupt the deficit discourse and/or silences typically presented in this 'rural space'. Results from the upcoming OECD 'global competencies' PISA measure may highlight the resilience, creativity and problem solving nature of children who live in rural, regional and remote schools. Measuring if they are able to 'navigate in time and social space to manage their lives in meaningful and responsible ways by influencing their living and working conditions' may reveal positive results.

It is hoped that the soon to be released regional education review will provide Australia with a blueprint for action. This coupled with a commitment to viewing all policy decisions with a rural lens may help to' recalibrate the 'rural compass' driving change

in discourse, mindsets and action across the nation and in turn celebrate the opportunities rural, regional and remote education offer those not from 'rural spaces'.

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