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ENGAGEMENT, EMPOWERMENT AND EQUITY IN RURAL EDUCATION

Susan Ledger

Head of Education, Murdoch University

Chief Editor AIJRE

Welcome to the second issue of AIJRE for 2019. The diverse papers from Australia and USA represent the collaborative endeavours of 18 researchers and practitioners interested in people living, teaching and learning in diverse rural, regional and remote (RRR) contexts around the globe. This growing interest in educational research in RRR locations and communities is significant for the progression and strength of research in the field. The editorial team would like to thank those authors who have contributed to this current issue and the growing number of researchers submitting papers for future issues. It celebrates and recognises the diversity of papers and research fields and highlights the great contribution they will make in providing further insight and knowledge about the productivity, potentialities and participation of RRR peoples and place. The six papers presented in this AIJRE 2019 Issue 2 are inextricably linked and connected through key concepts of *engagement, empowerment and equity (3Es)*. These concepts act as touch points for this series of papers and promote agency for those living, teaching and learning in RRR contexts.

Issue 2, 2019: Engagement, Empowerment and Equity

The series of papers in this current issue provide connections to past issues and prompt discussion for future papers. The collection has enabled the editors ‘to align strategically smaller-scale studies that when analysed and viewed together will highlight common themes, as well as shine a light on diversity and context relevant matters’ (White, 2016, p. vii). Although not strategically aligned or linked in design, when analysed these papers did reveal common themes relating to *Engagement, Empowerment and Equity*.

The first paper presented by Rutherford, McCalman and Bainbridge from Central Queensland University’s *Centre for Indigenous Health Equity Research* links to our previous indigenous special issue by highlighting the importance of indigenous knowledges, task based learning, and cross sectoral education, employment and community partnerships. The study raises concern about transition from schooling to higher education for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) secondary school graduates. Whilst an increase in indigenous students graduating from year 12 schooling is evident, just over a half of these students “translate this achievement into engagement with further study, training or employment” (p. 35). The group’s systematic review of literature highlights the complexity this transition juncture including non-linear, fragmented study and

employment pathways, accessibility and the ever present logistical challenges facing indigenous students.

A social ecological perspective was used by the authors to define the environmental conditions that influence post-schooling transitions of indigenous students. These conditions: social and cultural; economic and geographic; policy and institutional either facilitate or constrain student transitions. Indigenous students' perceptions of the role of schooling differs from policy makers. The primary purposes of education in the eyes of indigenous students, were (in order of importance): language, land and culture, identity, being 'strong in both worlds' and preparation for work (Guenther, Disbray, Benveniste, & Osborne, 2017). This perspective, coupled with the historical misalignments between community values and education approaches sees the need for cross-sectoral and community partnerships to help mitigate the risk of these students 'falling through the gaps' (Walsh and De Campo, 2010, p.31). Rutherford et al., reviewed literature to reveal the most common strategies utilised to nurture, mentor and support the transition of year 12 graduates into further education, training and employment. Behrendt, Larkin, Griew and Kelly (2012, p. xi) describe this process of supported transition as "unlocking capacity and empowering choice". Successful approaches included community-driven strategies, mentoring and role-modelling to promote aspirations, task based learning, immersion in university environments, and supporting students' language needs. The authors found that the values, needs and aspirations of remote living indigenous students are unique. They support Nakata's (2007) conclusion that these students generally navigate the transition pathways at the interface between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies.

The paper draws conclusions that address engagement, empowerment and equity. It highlights two divergent ideological approaches targeting the engagement of indigenous school graduates: 1) the national neoliberal standardisation of education policy direction leading to urban post schooling opportunities, and 2) its alternative that advocates a community based model linked to local employment and blended options. It recommends collaboration and alignment between community, educational institutions and employment services. The team also highlight the lack of evidence available and insight into immediate and long-term post schooling transitions.

The second, third and fourth papers form a cluster of papers that address practical issues impacting education engagement, empowerment and equity with a focus on delivery mode, communication and life circumstances.

Cathy Stone leads a team of academics from the University Newcastle and the University of Tasmania about online learning and the flexibility it offers for students living in regional and rural areas. Stone, Freeman, Dymont, Muir and Milthorpe confirm that the online student cohort is significantly different from the traditional on-campus cohort with many students being female, first in family, older, with responsibilities of family and work and many from RRR areas and within identified equity categories. They raise concern about online learning provision being regarded as an important equity measure because the potential gains are diminished by lower student retention and progression rates than on-campus students. They challenge the concept of flexibility espoused by

university online learning options when it is compromised by university policies and processes designed for on-campus offerings. They propose that it is important for universities to understand the profile of online students and modify their teaching, learning and support strategies to effectively engage and support these students. Currently, universities' desire to offer comparable student experiences for internal and online modes is compromised by their lack of flexibility in regards to assessment policy and practices. They refer to the Moore and Greenland (2017, p.52) comment that "many online educators are using policies and protocols that are designed for traditional on-campus students without adequate adaptation for the online learner." The flexibility affording online learning is therefore undermined and promotes an inequitable student experience. The authors sought insight from interviews conducted with a purposeful sample (n=9) of RRR online students representative of the general profile of online higher education students in Australia. This paper focuses on the understandings and experiences of this cohort in relation to the degree of flexibility offered in their online study. They asked each their interpretation of flexible learning, how they managed competing priorities, and their flexibility to move ahead or to catch up from behind within units. Their findings affirmed the demographic of the online cohort, its sense of isolation, and show that "life responsibilities inevitably impact upon their ability to prioritise study" with family and work being prioritised over study and therefore a main reason for attrition. They debate the issue of equality and equity and remind educators that equal treatment does not equate to equity of student experience. Similarly, they question flexibility as an equity measure in higher education and state that without sufficient flexibility the benefit of online students can be rendered inequitable. They conclude by acknowledging the challenge for universities to be flexible in their modes of delivery but call for them to limit the barriers, constraints and inflexible practices that currently exist and move towards more differentiated and flexible approaches.

James Cook University academics, Park, Caltabiano and Hajhashemi offer further insight into the participation preferences of university students in a rural university (n=223 age=17-59). Their paper is a response to the call for education providers and policy makers to better assess and tailor their offerings to the needs of students by better understanding how people engage in social interactions and online media.

New technologies afford greater connectivity for people separate by time and place, especially students living in rural areas. These social interactions provide a space for learners to construct knowledge and understanding (Pritchard and Woollard, 2013). This process is particularly important for rural and regional students. While most studies however have exposed the offline social interactions of RRR students and the online platforms they prefer, this study explores the nature of online social interaction within the demographic, geographic and cultural realms of rural. It focuses on understanding the role user characteristics, self-efficacy and interpersonal competence variables have on online communication preferences affecting social interactions. An online survey was conducted revealing key points for discussion including: the older the participants the higher interpersonal competence score, higher self-efficacy scores were related to higher interpersonal competence and emotional support. Communication style preferences, content disclosure and platform preferences revealed those enrolled in undergraduate degrees preferred using a synchronous style of messages and only 15% preferred

asynchronous. No preferences were found for any socio-demographic variable. Education differences highlighted social media as platform of choice for online communication with those individuals with higher levels of interpersonal competence preferring synchronous communication. It also revealed the predictive capacity of age and interpersonal competence for platform preferences and communication style. Interestingly, context did not feature as a significant preference. The authors acknowledge the need for more research into this burgeoning field.

Suleman and Chigeza, also from James Cook University targeted first year education students (n=15) who had limited participation and engagement in their study activities. Engagement rates of first year higher education students have dropped substantially since 2009 (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015). The authors acknowledge that the circumstances leading to students' lack of engagement with their studies are situational rather than innate and rarely reflect a student's ability to learn or succeed academically. The study begins by outlining the significantly different and changing face of commencing student cohorts into university within Australia from previous decades that have given rise to the need for better induction and first year experience programs. Many of these programs adopt remediation or supplementary instruction believing that some students entering university are not adequately prepared to be successful. Paradoxically, students who need support are those who are less likely to access it (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Building on related literature, the team explored the phenomenon from a range of perspectives: student records on life circumstances, engagement with college student support officers and lack of participation in study tasks.

Their participatory action research method draws from a holistic 'learning to learn' approach. It engaged first year regional university students in discussions about their lived experiences and life circumstances and the support strategies that they required to engage with the material. They also discussed the needs of first year students from the perspective of the college support officers who relayed and reflected on the circumstances of the first year education students who received support. The narratives and statistical data provided a wealth of data for the authors to interrogate. The findings highlighted approximately 25% of each cohort (start and mid year) displayed limited engagement with their studies and of these 75% accessed support. Of those that access support over 85% improved their engagement. But what happened to the missing 25% of non-engaged students? The authors concluded that life circumstances of rural students were significant factors impacting engagement. The main circumstances include: first in family, age, socio economic status, living away from home and work commitments. Each of these contributing factors overlap and compound negatively to impact the ability for this cohort to engage, feel empowered or successfully complete their studies. This study advocates engaging in a proactive agenda that addresses and mitigates life circumstances, supports relationships and provides equitable support for the diverse cohort of students entering universities.

Suleman and Chigeza's paper raises pertinent points of discussion. Students entering university studies require opportunity to be independent, self-regulate and manage their own performance. However, this can only occur if support officers know their students, their life circumstances and how they learn, not just what they are required to learn.

Our next two papers offer insight from American scholars who explore engagement, empowerment and equity from a policy perspective.

Cervone employs Henri Lefebvre's *Urban Revolution* (2003) to "theorize the way education policy is being used by the state to increase urbanisation and erase rural schools and communities." Massachusetts provides the case for this study, it is the least rural state in the U.S and is becoming even less rural with self-legitimizing policy directives, school closures and pressure from states for rural towns to justify their existence. Cervone's historical overview of Massachusetts explains how it emerged from predominately rural and agricultural beginnings to being transformed by political and industrial interventions into a thriving urbanised state with urban beliefs and changed values. The changing belief systems shaped by this historical landscape has given rise to the negative discourse surrounding 'rurality', an increased urban/rural divide and the notion that rural exists purely for production purposes, an engine for urbanisation. Eppley's (2011) *pedagogy of erasure* best describes the neoliberal practice of ignoring cultural contexts and place by reducing it to a narrow economic viewpoint informing policy decisions. Cervone offers a counter view in response to erasure in this paper, he calls for the creation of a *right to the rural*. He outlines the role and responsibility of educators to prepare rural youth to take action within their communities and stand up to the forces of production shaping current rural spaces and discourse.

Our final paper, *Parochialism or Pragmatic Resistance? The role of community-engaged leadership, activist scholarship and Vulnerable Rural Ecologies within school reform*, heralds from America. As a combined team of activist scholars from University of Maine and College of St. Rose, Mette, Biddle, Congdon and Mercado challenge the notion of rural resistance to reform efforts as a pragmatic response to decades of economic and spatial marginalization. The authors use Gutierrez's (2016) asset based social design experiment (SDE) approach, and conception of *vulnerable ecology* as a backdrop to their case study of education in Lafayette County. They position schools as sites of transformation within their study, places where communities see themselves as empowered to make important and lasting changes. Insight into the SDE process involved interviews (n=16) of those involved in the locally grown community leadership program Rethinking Education in Rural Settings (RERS). RERS emerged from a group of educational advocates who recognise that rural communities and public education systems remain vulnerable to outside influences that have little contextual understanding of the needs of rural communities, families or students. The program was developed to leverage "schools as one of the few social institutions that can address issues of childhood poverty, psychological and historical trauma in Lafayette County communities" (p. 18).

Their findings highlight the need for RRR communities to: protect vulnerable ecologies from educational reform efforts 'from afar', create spaces to address rural inequalities, and negotiate activist scholarship to empower school community transformation. Their call for "activist scholarship in rural school-community leadership to develop resilient ecologies that do not perpetuate patterns of repeated exclusion" (p. 13), is inspiring and transformational. In short, it advocates and promotes agency for those living, working, teaching and learning in RRR around the globe.

The findings from these two papers highlight the importance of RRR activism and the development of self-sufficient rural spaces. They encourage a grass roots approach for disrupting negative discourses, policies and practices impacting RRR contexts. Giving agency, promoting advocacy and encouraging radical self-managed and sustainable futures for rural people and places (Corbett, 2016; Halfacree, 2007; Ledger, 2018; Lefebvre, 2003) opposes the deliberate processes of capitalist urbanisation that currently exist. Moreover, Mette et al's recommendations to protect vulnerable ecologies, address rural inequities by resisting top down reform, and promote activist scholars to partner communities is transformational in terms of policy and practice.

In addition to our peer reviewed articles outlined below, our **Rural Connections: Celebrating Schools and Communities** section of this journal introduces an exemplary program from regional Western Australia. The Rural and Remote Training Schools (RRTS) program is a long-standing, sustainable program that embodies the core concepts underpinning this issue- engagement, empowerment and equity. The RRTS is representative of how collaborative partnerships across sectors can forge innovative and successful programs that meet the specific needs of RRR educational contexts. The RRTS has been awarded and recognised for its impact on RRR workforce planning nationally (SPERA Award) and internationally (OECD exemplary practice).

To conclude, I hope you find this selection of papers offer insight into the wonderful and complex world of rural, remote and regional education and opens up potentialities for future research and global collaborations in relation to engagement, empowerment and equity for RRR peoples and place.

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