

A curriculum for the country: The absence of the rural in a national curriculum

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Abstract

ON MOST INDICATORS of social and educational achievement, rural schools tend to lag behind their metropolitan counterparts. Overcoming these disadvantages through a common curriculum throughout Australia has been one of the aims of the development of the Australian Curriculum. However, will the Australian Curriculum achieve this goal? Any conclusion of disadvantage implies a comparison to some 'norm' or advantaged location. In educational achievement terms, this is usually against a form of standardised measure within a common state-based, or soon to be national, curriculum. The tacit implication therein that the same knowledge is necessary and desirable for all students fails to recognise that place renders some kinds of knowledge more valuable and useful than others. Consequently rural student dis-engagement and under-achievement can often be a function of a perceived lack of relevance or due recognition of the nature and value of place-based knowledge. This paper explores how a national approach to curriculum may in fact entrench rural educational disadvantage by positioning rural knowledges in an eternal binary with dominant metropolitan knowledges.

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One of the main rationales for moving to a national curriculum in Australia is the ongoing pursuit of equity in Australian education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011). However, in order to achieve this the new Australian Curriculum, influenced by the dominant discourses of the last decade, considers all schools as the same and all students as needing the same education. Dominated by distributive justice approaches that seek to allocate resources where they are needed most, this version of equity seeks instead to allocate knowledge where it is most needed, in the form of a standard national curriculum. In the process, the uniqueness of each school, indeed each classroom, becomes more an issue of curriculum enactment than any recognition of the distinctive funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) of students and their communities. The resultant marginalisation of rural knowledges in favour of a metropolitan-cosmopolitan form of knowledge creates rural educational disadvantage by

positioning the rural on the periphery of a 'normal' education. At issue here, then, is that education has become ambivalent to place, and moreover the proposition that equity has overlooked the role of the official curriculum in causing injustice rather than overcoming it. Thus, in this paper I suggest that Australian education needs to re-engage with issues of curricular justice through considering the affordances of place. To be clear, I use the term 'place' in accordance with Gieryn (2000, p. 465), who suggests that "place is space filled up by people, practices, objects and representations", to refer to the local as understood by each individual, student, teacher and community member. Such a focus resists standardised national values and associated knowledges and instead brings attention to the values and knowledges of different places, such as, for my argument here, rural places.

In developing this position I begin by echoing the question, asked by Mark Doecke over two decades ago in this journal, in relation to rural disadvantage —'Is it for real?':

Which child is more educationally disadvantaged—the one who has to travel fifty minutes across a bumpy, outback road to get to school, or the one who rides to school on a bicycle through a maze of busy intersections filled with peakhour city traffic? Which student is receiving the more appropriate educational experiences—the one who learns in a biology textbook the cycle of life, or the one who witnesses the birth of a calf? Which adolescents have been better prepared for life ... So the question regarding to what extent rural children are disadvantaged educationally needs to be seen less in relation to external factors such as distance and facilities, and more in terms of the curriculum being offered, quality of teachers, and the relationship between curriculum and environment. At the same time there needs to be caution in guarding against parochialism that could result if one does not have a curriculum that takes students beyond their environment. (Doecke, 1987, p. 31)

By using the question asked by Doecke I am not proposing a romantic or nostalgic view of the rural; indeed as Doecke himself states, a curriculum that does not extend students from their environment is parochial and limited. However, I use this quote to raise the idea that there are other ways to 'be' in the modern world, and other experiences outside that

in the official curriculum, and the two don't always relate (I'm prompted to think here about the stories of city children who are not familiar with where their food comes from, such as the fact that milk comes from a cow). If we assume that an important role of teaching is to help students find a place for themselves in the curriculum, often by beginning lessons with ideas or experiences that students can relate to, then my argument is that what we now have in Australia is something most rural students may well have trouble relating to. Instead, the dominant curriculum encourages them to value other ways of being and prepares them to leave their communities in order to 'succeed' (Corbett, 2007).

A cosmopolitan nation

Curriculum is a window on the nation; what it values about its past and what it hopes for its future. Prophetic then is Judith Brett's (2011) argument that the importance of the rural in the national imaginary and economy has been declining since World War II, and that this has been accelerated by national competition policy that demands rural regions be self-supporting. This shifting relevance of the rural raises the spectre of an important curriculum question about the nation we represent to future generations and the nation we aim to build through our curriculum. As Green (2003) has argued, curriculum development in Australia has been particularly concerned with developing the nation's identity, yet within this is the problem of how to represent the nation of today to the students of tomorrow (Green, 2010). At this point in curriculum history, the issue of the nation and representation is fraught as politicians look to curriculum to preserve a version of the past, as evidenced in the debates around the content of the Australian Curriculum: History, and reference a global future, as seen in the *Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals of Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008).

However, instead of providing a framework to discuss issues of the nation and uncertain futures, Brennan (2011) argues that the Australian Curriculum is a political instrument that legislates the nation through a form of coercive federalism. That is, the Australian Curriculum is a political instrument to empower the federal government at the expense of the states. This is a significant shift in that it works to reshape the fundamental governance of the nation, and it also co-opts the curriculum into this new nation making. Through this move, the

traditionally separate fields of policy (the distribution of scarce resources) and curriculum (the knowledge we pass on to future generations) have been conflated such that curriculum has been repositioned as an instrument of policy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Brennan, 2011; Luke, Woods & Weir, 2013). Perhaps even more problematic is that the dominant policy discourse of at least the last decade, of which curriculum is now a part, sees education in human capital and economic terms. Through this shift education has become a tool in what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) call the ‘neoliberal social imaginary’, a socio-political perspective based on the ‘necessity’ of neoliberalism. As both the neoliberal imaginary and the national goals for schooling have a global outlook, seek economic advancement, and value mobility in a globalised world, they are inherently cosmopolitan (McLeod, 2012; Popkewitz, 2008). Combined, the neoliberal social imaginary and cosmopolitanism forms the basis of the system of ideas and reasoning that influences the development of the curriculum (Popkewitz, 1997). Such cosmopolitan outlooks tend to marginalise the rural (Corbett, 2010) by positioning it as embracing old, unproductive, inefficient and inward-looking ways (Brett, 2011). Consequently, educational (under-)achievement is socially constructed as a natural outcome linked to rurality. Completing the cycle of neoliberal necessity, this natural (under-)achievement then enables the construction of standardisation, monitoring and reporting as ‘common sense’ approaches to improving equity for disadvantaged groups.

It is in this context that the Australian Curriculum has been developed as a curriculum for a nation, and as such the nation it imagines and represents to students—and the freedom it allows to explore these perspectives—is of immense importance. As Luke, Woods and Weir (2013) point out, curriculum debates have traditionally focused upon the knowledge question, and not what they term ‘the technical form’ of the curriculum. Their argument is not to dismiss questions of knowledge, as they recognise the centrality of this as a form of recognitional social justice, but to suggest that perhaps the curriculum form is more important. Drawing on their own work and others, such as Schleicher (2008), they posit that a form of ‘informed proscription’, where teachers have freedom to make the curriculum relevant to their students and their communities, provides more equitable outcomes than an overly prescriptive

syllabus style curriculum. Driven by a neoliberal version of equity, the Australian Curriculum has been described as “a syllabus document, specifying content and sequence of content by year level of schooling” (Brennan, 2011 p. 264) to ensure that everyone learns the same thing that can then be regulated through testing, measurement and accountability (Lingard, 2010) in order to achieve its equity goal. In the case of the rural, the Australian Curriculum becomes an example of the way in which the mediated nature of just practices that involve norms, such as those dominant in Australian education end up working against it in practice (Gewirtz, 2006).

Against the backdrop of comparatively poor educational achievement of many students in rural areas compared with many students in metropolitan areas, these ‘equity’ justifications take on significant weight. However, as I have argued elsewhere, these interpretations of rural educational disadvantage are based on metropolitan assumptions of achievement against metropolitan-determined norms. Through their construction and application, they position everything outside them as deviant and in need of remedy through special programs or additional resources through mixed applications of distributive and recognitive justice (Roberts & Green, 2013). By introducing Soja’s (2010) notion of ‘spatial justice’, which suggests that spatiality is another way of understanding the world in a ‘trialectic’ with traditionally dominant historical and social perspectives, we can begin to see that the rural has not been constituted in its own terms. In terms of social justice and equity policy, the central problem for the rural is that it has not been identified as an equity group in the same way as, for example, low socio-economic status communities, Aboriginal students, language backgrounds other than English, or (historically) gender. Instead, location has been constructed as an equity consideration due to distance from cultural resources or coincidentally constituted of groups associated with lower educational achievement such as low socio-economic status and Aboriginal students. Thus location is assumed to be related to socio-economic status and not conceived as a constituent factor in itself: geography (i.e. space/place) is factored out and effectively denied first-order significance (Roberts & Green, 2013). Let me be clear: the well-established connection between parental education, income and students’ educational achievement is real and not disputable, and clearly exists in rural

locations. However, it does not account for the totality of the rural experience, as assumed in much public discourse.

The assumed link between location and socio-economic disadvantage can be seen in the example of the main equity program for rural areas, the Country Areas Program (CAP), which was founded on the idea that people living in geographically isolated areas can be educationally disadvantaged (DEST, 2003). Here distance is primarily a cultural deficit and the program seeks to overcome this deficit by providing access to cultural resources through excursions and additional resourcing. However, despite the program's 25-year history, schools receiving its support—by definition, the most isolated—still achieve educational outcomes significantly behind other schools receiving different forms of equity support (though it should be noted that a number also receive CAP and other equity program funding—Roberts, 2008). Contradicting the logic that isolation equates to lower socio-economic status, Lamb, Teese and Helme (2005) found that schools receiving CAP funding were no more disadvantaged than rural schools not receiving such funding, thus dispelling the idea that more isolated schools are necessarily comprised of lower socio-economic status populations. Despite this evidence that location and socio-economic disadvantage are not necessarily linked, CAP was abolished federally in favour of national partnerships focusing on literacy and low socio-economic communities; reinforcing the dominance of distributive justice approaches to equity and effectively reinforcing the marginalisation of rural communities.

Positioning curriculum as policy, especially its stated role in helping achieve equity (ACARA, 2011), predisposes a disposition to standardisation, regulation and accountability as per broad neoliberal governance. Through this process, curriculum is separated from pedagogy, itself codified as skills in Department-sponsored models of pedagogy, such that curriculum is no longer the situated enactment (Yates, 2009) that is responsive to students and their communities and, instead, is powerful knowledge to be mastered. In de Certeauian (1984) terms, teachers can respond by either implementing this strategy or employ their own tactics to reshape the curriculum. Indeed, as I observed in a recent study exploring the relationship (of secondary history teachers in New South Wales) between place, rural education, social justice and teachers' professional

identity, teachers tended to fall into two categories: those who locate their practice in place, and those who value a more bureaucratic approach to their work (Roberts, 2013). In curriculum terms, the group of teachers who were place-conscious tended to see the formal curriculum as a guide they could manipulate and creatively interpret, whereas the more bureaucratic saw it as a guide to follow (Roberts, 2013). The more bureaucratic accepted the necessity of the neoliberal strategy, whereas the place-conscious employed tactics of resistance by reshaping the curriculum in relation to their students and their communities.

Curriculum and rural education: Looking back

The relationship between the official curriculum and its 'relevance' or 'acceptability' for rural communities has been raised in a number of reports (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987; McKenzie, Harrold & Sturman, 1996; HREOC, 2000); however these are now mostly dated, and the issues they raise seen to be irrelevant under the neoliberal ideologies that dominate education today. Together these reports have raised issues about: the nature of the secondary school curriculum, its perceived lack of relevance to a rural community background, the importance of making curriculum relevant, concerns about tertiary pathway assumptions of the curriculum, and concerns about possibly streaming kids away from tertiary pathways. Referencing concerns about the staffing of rural schools (HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005), the problem of staff expertise in school subjects and the curriculum expertise to make them relevant was perhaps a greater concern in these reports. In an important semantic shift, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry (2000) used the term 'acceptable' to describe the form of schooling required in rural areas, as well as emphasising the place of a 'relevant' curriculum in this acceptable education. This construction shifts the emphasis from the curriculum to the people studying it, implicitly challenging the knowledge assumptions of the curriculum. Building upon these ideas, and recognising that "the knowledge base from which rural students operate is different" (Higgins, 1993, pp. ix–xi), the former CAP operated from a rationale that rural disadvantage is associated with inappropriate curricula and teaching strategies (DEST, 2003). Consequently schools could use CAP funding to develop curriculum resources, although

such programs have since been abolished under the national partnerships and the focus on 'equity and excellence'.

Equally noticeable, though, is that these are the sum of concerns in these reports about relevance or appropriateness: while it was an issue, it was not *the* issue. Instead, supporting Cuervo's (2012) argument that distributive justice concerns dominate rural equity, are the findings of these reports in relation to: a reduced range and breadth in curriculum offerings due to staffing allocations being linked to enrolment, less face-to-face classes to attempt to compensate and provide a broader subject range, compensatory distance education enrolments for some subjects, and staff often teaching in areas outside of their expertise and inexperienced in the level of teaching (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987; McKenzie et al., 1996; HREOC, 2000). Like the default position of CAP, of re-contextualising the curriculum rather than changing it, these issues are essentially structural and related to staffing and funding structures. While they impact significantly upon the enacted curriculum, they do not look at the nature of the curriculum or teachers' views in its enactment.

These reports demarcate a period in the 1980s through to the early 2000s, arguably influenced by Michael Young's *Knowledge and Control* (1971) and Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett's *Making the Difference* (1982), that raise significant questions about the politics of knowledge in the curriculum. More generally, this period is associated with recognition of and concern for poverty in education that saw the establishment, and influence, of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) and CAP, and that sought to improve equity in education by making curriculum and school more relevant and accessible to traditionally disadvantaged groups. Against this backdrop, the new Australian Curriculum can be seen as returning to the long-standing tradition in relation to Australia's rural regions of ensuring equity through standardisation; there is, argue Green and Letts (2007, p. 61) a "view, deeply enshrined in the Australian system, that location is of no consequence to the delivery of education, that distance can be effectively annulled".

While the previous reports into rural schooling raise questions about the curriculum and imply its role in educational (under-)achievement, more recently the curriculum has been seen as the means of providing equity. However, regarding the curriculum as a means of ensuring equity inevitably

means a position about which knowledge is seen as most important for the nation's development, echoing Green's (2003) point about curriculum developing the idea of the nation while ignoring the role of teachers. However, according to the reports cited earlier, it is the teachers' familiarity with the curriculum that is an equally significant influence on the enacted curriculum. Thus while it is suggested that teachers can indeed contextualise the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012a,b), this is reliant upon their knowledge of the curriculum, their knowledge of the community they are teaching in, and their view of the rural in society. If they don't know the 'place' they are teaching in, or have a view that certain knowledges are more important for students to master, they will inevitably, and unintentionally, further marginalise rural students. Indeed a concern for such unintentional marginalisation is evident in these reports and their caveats that the curriculum needs to balance relevance and utility. However, utility is often constructed as akin to familiarity in powerful cosmopolitan knowledges, and as such reinforces the marginalisation of the rural while teaching students to leave (Corbett, 2007).

Revisiting curricular justice

In exploring the perspectives on social justice held by rural teachers, Cuervo (2012) noted the dominance of distributive justice thinking in rural education policy and in the day-to-day concerns of rural teachers. Specifically, the teachers in his study tended to focus on quasi-economic material aspects of schooling such as the distribution of resources or opportunities, or the pressures of teaching in this neoliberal time where they feel they have no voice in determining what or how to teach their students (Cuervo, 2012). As Cuervo (2012), and Connell (1993) have argued, the *process* of schooling is as, and perhaps more, important than the *product*. However, despite his enlarged social justice argument, Cuervo (2012) doesn't explicitly include the knowledge represented in the curriculum as a significant social justice issue. It is to this question of curricular justice that I now turn.

Since Doecke's question about rural disadvantage, *Is it for real?*, the discussion of an 'appropriate' or 'relevant' curriculum for rural communities has been largely limited to the reports discussed earlier, and in a limited fashion Cuervo (2012), also discussed earlier, and Drummond, Halsey and van Breda (2012), looking at issues related to the

implementation of the Australian Curriculum. This limited treatment is symptomatic of the growing acceptance of a standardised curriculum to achieve equity and the cosmopolitan assumptions of such a curriculum. However, as Popkewitz points out “the cosmopolitan child is not born but made, and ... schooling is the central site of this production” (Popkewitz, 2008 p. 3). Building on this, the difference Doecke points to is produced, and it is produced primarily through the curriculum and reinforced by dominant discourses of effective pedagogy. This outcome can be seen in the example of the two types of teachers discussed previously, where the more bureaucratically inclined value a cosmopolitan curriculum endorsed by the state and taught to students, who consequently resist and are positioned as disadvantaged and inadequate.

That the role of the curriculum in producing, as opposed to reducing, educational disadvantage has only had limited reference in recent curriculum reforms is unfortunate, given Connell’s keynote address 20 years ago at the 1991 ACSA conference and subsequent paper (Connell, 1992) on the role of the curriculum in producing disadvantage. In that paper, Connell pointed out that social justice is more than an issue of the distribution of resources, and is inherently about access to dominant forms of knowledge as encoded in the curriculum. This finding is partly recognised in special programs for identified disadvantaged groups, where the curriculum is adjusted or cross-curriculum perspectives included to bridge between their understanding and the official cosmopolitan knowledge. However, in relation to rural disadvantage, redistributive approaches have dominated, with for example the CAP providing extra resources to bridge the perceived cultural deficit, rather than actively challenging and reformulating the knowledge base, as Connell (1993) suggests.

This ‘curricular justice’ approach suggests that we need to look critically at the type of education being provided, and further indicates that an unjust curriculum is one which includes practices that allow some groups to gain a greater share of social power, one which thereby confirms or justifies disadvantage, where socio-educational change towards equality is blocked, and which moreover reduces people’s capacity to remake their world (Connell, 1993). In relation to rural communities, the Australian Curriculum could therefore be judged as unjust according to these criteria, as it is based on cosmo-

politan values and surrounded by an edifice of neoliberal governmentality. That many rural students do not achieve the same outcomes as their metropolitan counterparts is clear evidence of an unjust curriculum—but, to be fair, these results are associated with existing state-based curricula as the Australian Curriculum is not yet fully implemented.

In terms of a curricular justice approach, the central issue becomes what constitutes rural education. It is not simply the curriculum delivered, or the staffing of schools, or the resources made available; rather, it is the whole education project, broadly conceived, whereby the rural fits within the discourse of the nation. As argued earlier in this paper, the nation has been redefined in terms of the neoliberal imaginary and its metropolitan-cosmopolitan assumptions. Rather than being an issue of curriculum per se, equity is reconstructed as an issue of implementation and the focus of “targeted support ... to achieve better educational outcomes” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 15). Specifically: “Schools and school systems are responsible for delivering curriculum programs that reflect these learning areas, with appropriate flexibility to determine how this can best be achieved in a local context” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 14); and, as reinforced in the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* paper: “Schools are able to decide how best to deliver the curriculum” (ACARA, 2011, p. 13). As such, those implementing it—the teachers—can be blamed for any lack of equality that results as the possibility that the curriculum itself is inequitable is removed; the questions raised by either Doecke or Connell’s concerns for curricular justice are invalidated.

Within this approach, teachers and schools appear free, whereas they have instead had their roles and expectations redefined and circumscribed. The state has used the rhetoric of empowering local communities and schools through de-regulation, when it is in fact engaged in a complex process of re-regulation with new forms of control based on alternative expectations (Ball, 2003) defined by the new élites of the political right. Consequently, the de-regulated school or teacher becomes less responsive to their context as they instead adhere to national guidelines, such as curriculum, professional standards, testing regimes and other high-stakes assessment, against which they will be judged and evaluated. These national guidelines and curriculum embody cosmopolitan values of excellence as defined in its own terms, and subsequently leave little room

for any attention to the places in which they are enacted. Consequently teachers are encouraged to teach (to) a curriculum, employing a pedagogy articulated through standards and pedagogy models, which does not take into account the cultural capital or situated knowledge of their students. In this context, all that matters is results; students, and their knowledge, don't matter—relations with children “are *at* them rather than *with* them” (Ball, 2003, p. 222, original emphasis). Speaking ‘at them’ is easy when difference is not recognised, and in this case, when rurality is deemed peripheral to the central issue of achievement in a cosmopolitan curriculum.

Curriculum and rural education: Today

I turn now to the representation of the rural, and the space for non-cosmopolitan knowledge, in the new Australian Curriculum. As such, I am looking to see if there are any representations of non-cosmopolitan spaces, especially rural areas, or if there are references to linking the curriculum to local contexts. While there may be no specific reference to rural communities, instructions to look at local contexts act as curriculum guides for teachers and, as such, are symbolically powerful in encouraging teachers, particularly those in non-metropolitan areas, to look at the local community. I will be examining the curriculum primarily in relation to the Australian Curriculum: History with a brief reference to the Australian Curriculum: English. There are three reasons for this focus upon the Australian Curriculum: History. Firstly, and pragmatically, it is the curriculum framework that I am most familiar with; secondly, History is a subject through which the valued perception of the nation is conveyed; and finally, there has been a social and political preoccupation with the way that the nation is represented in the history curriculum (Clark, 2006). While I recognise that English also conveys a significant meaning, the Australian Curriculum: English is structured more in terms of literacy competencies, with novels chosen by the school curriculum leader and teacher. Conversely, the Australian Curriculum: History contains a number of important content points to be learnt by students. I would invite those with knowledge of the English curriculum area to undertake a similar study from that perspective.

The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (ACARA, 2011), a guiding document that directed the subsequent development of the curriculum, contained a strong statement about including local contexts in curriculum. Specifically, it stated: “The

national history curriculum will provide flexibility and choice for teachers. The factors that influence this choice include school and community contexts, local history learning opportunities, contemporary and local issues and available learning resources” (ACARA, 2011 p. 12). Notably this statement was included in a section titled ‘equity and opportunity’, and presents a view that curriculum needs to relate to students and their communities. However, in the subsequent curriculum document, this view had slipped to simply asserting that “[t]he curriculum provides opportunities for the content to be taught using specific local contexts” (ACARA, 2013a), and upon further analysis, this is essentially contained in the Foundation to Year Three curriculum. Thereafter, the history represented becomes more abstract and removed from students’ communities, as the type of history represented shifts from understanding historical processes to representing the nation and its place in a global world. Indeed as the rationale for the Australian Curriculum: History states, “The curriculum generally takes a world history approach within which the history of Australia is taught. It does this in order to equip students for the world (local, regional and global) in which they live” (ACARA, 2013a). Put another way, as the curriculum content descriptions move from foundational to higher stakes, the knowledge that is privileged becomes more abstract and more powerful. As students develop, they increasingly learn about other ‘places’ and that ideas and events driving national and global developments are centred elsewhere.

Structurally, other problems arise at this point, as mentioned by Brennan (2011). Firstly, the curriculum that is promoted as being ‘open’ consists of a number of syllabus-like content descriptions that need to be covered within an uncertain time allocation. Secondly, the movement to learning about events begins to involve a greater degree of historical knowledge from the teacher, something that may be problematic especially in the primary school curriculum and jurisdictions where History does not have a strong independent tradition. While learning about some of the primary topics has opportunities to include the local, the structure of the syllabus acts to privilege the implied meanings. Linking to the local (rural) relies on a disposition of the teacher to do so, and this furthermore relies upon a valuing of the local in relation to the powerful knowledge of elsewhere.

Briefly, broadening the theme of curriculum as related to national development, ACARA states in the rationale for the Australian Curriculum: English, “The *Australian Curriculum: English* contributes both to nation-building and to internationalisation ... The *Australian Curriculum: English* also helps students to engage imaginatively and critically with literature to expand the scope of their experience” (ACARA, 2013b, n.d.). Importantly, it is up to a school’s curriculum leader and class teacher to decide which texts to use in their study of the Australian Curriculum: English; as such, it is their view of what is important to know and their understanding of the Australian nation that influences these decisions. It would appear that, in contrast to the Australian Curriculum: History, it is only in Year 8 that students are directed to “[e]xplore the interconnectedness of Country and Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors” (ACARA, 2013b, n.d.). However, here the elaborations that suggest what teachers may include are within the ‘context’ of Aboriginal literature, and not any other representation of the rural.

Returning to the overall structure of the Australian Curriculum, it is clear that, as Luke et al. (2013) suggest, the real curricular decisions have been made by bureaucrats through structural issues, consistent with Green’s (2003) argument that Australian curriculum reform has traditionally had a bureaucratic character. Perhaps the clearest evidence that the needs of rural schools are not understood, or considered, is that the Australian Curriculum is structured in chronological year-based order. As Brennan (2011) suggests, the year-by-year structure is problematic as many rural schools are small schools, with students grouped in staged classes. Previous syllabus structures in most jurisdictions allowed for this; for example, New South Wales has staged curriculum documents, and as such students can learn coherently in mixed-age classes. However the Australian Curriculum doesn’t appear to have an overarching stage structure. Furthermore, the chronological structure creates difficult demands on teachers in small schools to meet the needs of students in the same class but learning different chronological years. Finally, this chronological structure also suggests the dominance of scientific thinking in education, as it roughly aligns with Piaget’s stages of human development. In this dominance of science, it is apparent that any learning

gaps can be remedied by extra resources and tuition through distributive justice programs, while curricular justice is positioned as unscientific.

The second structural issue relates to consultation. Here the issue revolves around the way that feedback from rural schools is valued and used in the curriculum development process, and as part of this, how much recognition is given to the feedback from a smaller part of the educational community. The example used here centres on the inclusion of local (rural) knowledge in the curriculum, and issues raised in a previous study by Drummond, Halsey and van Bredar (2012) which demonstrates that the perceived lack of adequate consultation is a concern for rural communities. Specifically, the first consultation version of the Australian Curriculum: History included in Years 7–9 a ‘school-developed study’ that would enable schools to develop locally relevant history units in each of these years. However, the consultation report on the Australian Curriculum: History suggested these options be removed, as they were deemed “unnecessary in an essential learning curriculum and will free up time for the essentials” (ACARA, 2010, p. 157). The wording that the school-developed options were not ‘essential’ illustrates two important considerations: firstly, for all the rhetoric, the curriculum is clearly perceived by teachers as an essential learning syllabus focus; and secondly, this essential learning must be directed to a view of the national image created through the History curriculum—one that doesn’t recognise the importance of local places, let alone rural places. This ‘essential’ learning is inevitably constructed here as essential content important to becoming a nation and demonstrates a continuation of much early curriculum work in Australia (Green, 2003). Furthermore, the use of ‘consultation’ by the official ACARA document needs to be considered in light of Drummond et al.’s (2012) findings about consultation and Cuervo’s arguments about associational justice and rural teachers’ abilities to have a recognised voice. Without this, the rural is decidedly at a disadvantage, as through a spatial justice perspective the weight of consultation will favour metropolitan concerns, even when rural representatives and consultation are included, *unless* they are given greater individual weight.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how, through a discourse of neoliberal necessity, the idea of a standardised curriculum as a technology to enhance equity has

taken hold. Such an approach rests upon distributive justice assumptions in that it regards knowledge as a 'good' to be distributed, with its absence to be compensated. Furthermore, while ideas of associational justice influence equity approaches to traditionally supported marginalised groups, the rural has not achieved such a status of recognition. Instead, rural educational achievement is simply conflated with average lower socio-economic status communities or with Indigenous communities. This lack of recognition of rural place leads to two fundamental problems: firstly, the idea that knowledge is situated, or that rural students operate from different funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), is excluded; and secondly, the rural is not given a voice in curriculum design and development. Rather, a view of a cosmopolitan-neoliberal nation is promulgated through the curriculum. In highlighting these concerns I have evoked the idea of place, and revisited the ideas of curricular justice, to suggest that there is another way to look at the new curriculum and its equity implications. Specifically I suggest that the failure of the Australian Curriculum to take into account the needs of rural schools, students and communities is a fundamental injustice. In countering this failure, I have argued that through a curricular justice approach rural meanings can, and need to, be advocated and included (Howley, Theobald & Howley, 2005) in the curriculum. This proposal necessitates a definition of the rural that does not pre-determine all the rural as either singular or a unity, but rather recognises the particularities and differences of rural place(s), something that can only be achieved if rurality is put back on the educational agenda (Brennan, 2005). Finally, while I have focused upon the rural in this paper, I suggest that 'the rural' in this example acts as a hermeneutic to look at any place.

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