Chapter 1
International Trends and Patterns in Innovation in Rural Education

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Abstract  This chapter explores the interplay between the notions of rurality, innovation and education by analysing the eight chapters in this volume and explores the trends and patterns that emerge by looking at the studies from across multiple global rural places and spaces. The analysis reveals a hopeful and resilient approach to innovative rural education and scholarship, and collectively, important evidence to speak against an often deficit view of rural education. Three patterns are revealed across the studies, namely: the importance of place-attentive strategies, the importance of joined up alliances to maximise resources and networks and finally, the need to utilise alternative methodologies and frameworks that have a starting point of difference rather than deficit for any rural initiative or approach. In short, a tripartite of place, people and power are offered as essential to any effective rural education innovation. And given the highly contextual nature of this tripartite, it is clear that while the specific innovations presented in the current studies can not necessarily be transplanted or adopted wholesale, these three essential elements are a true foundation for future rural education studies and scholars to explore.

Keywords  Rurality · Innovation · Education · Place-attentive

1.1 Rural Education Innovation?

Innovation is often defined as the introduction of new things, ideas or ways of doing something. Synonyms for innovation can include words like change, reorganisation, transformation, unconventionality and ‘a change of direction’. Occasionally, when we hear a reference to innovation it is used in a deficit context referring to efforts to replace practices that are viewed as old-fashioned, irrelevant or lacking in some way. However, innovation is also used in reference to hopeful, responsive and creative
efforts to build on the positive outcomes that have occurred and extend those efforts to meet current needs.

When coupled with the word education, a meaning is drawn that is often linked to the development of new ideas, structures, technological advances and various disruptions designed for the purpose of strengthening traditional means of schooling and teaching. In relation to schools, there is often talk of fostering twenty-first century skills for young people such as curiosity, creativity, entrepreneurialism and problem-solving. Sometimes ‘innovation’ and ‘education’ combined can be used to refer to programmes, for example, whereby a school is ‘going against a particular trend’, in a positive direction, in some way addressing an inequity or problem that has been identified. One example is a school that might be retaining more teachers by adopting a unique and different approach.

What then is evoked when the word rural is added to the mix? What emerges when the words rural, education and innovation are all connected? How do notions of change, transformation, disruption and creativity (as examples) play out when ‘rurality’ is considered? Are there trends and/or patterns of rural education innovation that emerge if we look at studies from across multiple global rural places and spaces? What can such an investigation offer rural education researchers and the education profession? Such questions were the impetus for this book and a call out to those working globally in rural education to document and discuss their innovations; whether it be through developing new approaches in rural (teacher) education, considering new designs for policy and programmes or applying new theoretical tools. The response to our call was quick and substantive.

Our authors’ contributions clearly demonstrate that there is much innovation going on around the world in regard to rural education research, scholarship and policy. The studies shared in this volume highlight examples of transformation and ingenuity enacted by the researchers and their institutions with their various rural communities. The work also provides clear, cautionary tales of the perils of any thought of homogenising rural education innovation or wholesale transplanting of any particular idea, concept or practice from one context to another.

This collection draws from a global community of rural researchers writing from a similar stance of deep commitment to rural places but doing their work in dramatically different contexts. The studies include those from vastly different landscapes and cultures: from perspectives from rural China to rural Appalachia in the United States; from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to the rural towns in South Africa; and from the northern oceanic climate of rural Nova Scotia in Canada to the hot and dry inland rural towns in Queensland, Australia. It is acknowledged that the studies here do not represent all rural contexts and places, for example, there are no studies from South America or Continental Europe. The field is however growing and we note a recently published volume exploring the often invisible and adverse consequences of metro-centric educational policies on rural students’ and communities’ experience of place and space across rural Europe (Gristy, Hargreaves, & Kučerová, 2020).

Throughout this scholarly work, two considerations become clear. First, the fact that the notion of rural cannot be defined simply by geography or distance from a metropolitan city or population density. Rather, around the world, definitions of rural
are spatialised, nuanced and scaled relative to particular places and the challenges encountered in those places (White & Corbett, 2014). These definitions are important because they take into account the historical, ecological, economic and politicised understandings of rural communities (Azano et al., 2019), which then guide and shape the nature and implementation of the innovations. Even in comparing the various studies across the collection, each context can be viewed by another as more or less ‘rural’ considering the perspective and standpoint. As McGrail et al. (2005) neatly notes: “[t]here is no essential rural or metropolitan, but a concept of rural or metropolitan based on a continuum in regard to population numbers, accessibility of services, attitudes and values” (p. 22).

The second aspect that unites the studies is that the authors write from a rural perspective and adopt a researcher position that deeply values the rural community’s strengths and voices. These researchers are not writing about rural people, nor does their research simply occur in rural places. Rather, these authors are demonstrating their commitment to engaging in context-specific educational service, scholarship and research that creates knowledge, insight and understanding as requested by and relevant to the lives of rural people, schools and communities. This volume also heeds the advice given to the rural education research community about ways to improve the status of research summarised by Hargreaves et al. (2020):

Avoid unsubstantiated advocacy of the merits of small and/or rural schools, provide better contextual detail (to obviate the angst over dichotomous rural/urban definitions) and increase the criticality, objectivity and empirical work of the research. … rich descriptions of rural deficiency must be replaced with imaginative, constructive ideas and more evidence of community involvement. (p. 340)

This approach to rural education research is intentionally attuned to, respectful of and appreciative of, the complex and unique realities and relationships of rural life—past, present and future. As called for by Greenwood (2013), these researchers are engaged in the important work of remembering, restoring, conserving, changing and creating new, innovative ways to help rural communities thrive. This collection, and this chapter, provide an opportunity to take a ‘hopeful’ stance to gather insights into building vibrant and resilient rural communities (Halsey, 2018).

1.2 Hope and Resilience in Rural Education

The notions of hope and resilience emerge in the chapters as well as in related literature in rural education innovation. The hope revealed and demonstrated here is not simply wishful thinking or helpless longing for improvement. Rather, the hope depicted by our authors is a steadfast commitment to envisioning possible futures and taking action to bring that vision to reality. In the face of serious challenges, developing a vision that energises action is key to rural education innovation. In these contexts, hope is a vision for what the future can be, accompanied by an effort to create effective pathways to make it so. Throughout this volume, you will
encounter examples of rural education innovation empowered by hope—vision and action—and a powerful reminder that how we envision our future together will shape how we live our present together. Hope, when defined as vision and action, is the antidote to despair. The chapters in this volume tell the research stories of enacted hope in rural education innovation and reveal the cultivation of powerful practices leading to resilience.

In the vernacular, the notion of resilience is typically considered as an ability to recover or bounce back and has been used to describe items ranging from cosmetics to agriculture. However, more than 50 years of resilience research has been much more consequential; studies have identified specific factors and mechanisms that can support individuals’ and communities’ capacity to respond, cope and overcome significant risks, challenges, hardships and traumas (Downey, 2002). These findings have contributed to a nuanced understanding of resilience as a dynamic process of ongoing interactions between an individual and contextual resources that support positive adaptation within the context of adversity (Downey, 2017). Studies have found that this process of positive adaptation for communities and individuals is not a permanent achievement, nor is it the result of a singular trait such as personality. Rather, resilience is a positive trajectory that is sustained by a combination of ongoing protective and supportive interactions between individual, family and local contextual resources that work together to support personal and/or community success (Downey, 2017). This means that we do not ask students and communities to simply be more resilient; rather, we work together to build spaces and processes that can support positive adaptation through interaction.

Throughout the chapters in this volume, the authors provide examples of how rural education innovation energised by hopeful vision has inspired, nurtured and sustained resilience—powerful ongoing interactions producing positive adaptation for rural communities and individuals across the world. Writing from the Australian context, Richard Price (2014) equates rural (education) innovation and research as ‘adaption’ and ‘resilience’. Perhaps these two concepts are more important than ever given the global pandemic and what might lie ahead in a post-COVID-19 world for rural and regional communities. He notes:

In the context of building future resilience in the bush, the role of rural research needs to take into account the nature of resilience. Important elements of resilience are the capacity to self-organise, learn, adapt and cope with nonlinearities and uncertainties (Lebel et al., 2006). These are also important elements in dealing with multiple problem domains (Reynolds, 2001). Most critically, these aspects of resilience support an adaptive management approach to dealing with the growing complexity of rural issues. (Price, 2014, p. 241)

Hope and resilience in light of many of the complex challenges faced by those in rural communities is an important feature of the themes that emerge from the chapters in this book. Some may argue that rural places have always been places of innovation, as the saying goes, ‘necessity is the mother of invention’ and many rural people and communities have continued to reinvent and renew themselves even in the face of major challenges ranging from experiences of natural disasters to the impact of urbanisation. As Wallin (2007) reminds us: “Rural communities that envision a bright future for themselves and their children have become innovative out
of necessity—they learn, and adapt, in order to flourish and to provide opportunities for their children” (p. 1).

Hope and resilience, it can be argued, are traits in which many First Nations people have continued to engage with land and their culture, in the face of constant waves of colonisation and neoliberalism. Drawing from Australian Indigenous research Price (2014) notes:

Over millennia, Australia’s traditional owners found ways to adapt to the harsh and diverse environments of the Australian continent. This adaptation process no doubt involved trial and error, the use of human imagination and creativity to go beyond the bounds of the known, the collaboration of expertise and the sharing of knowledge through stories. (p. 256)

Similar patterns emerge in the ways in which the studies within this collection highlight rural education innovation. In our analysis of the chapters, three particular patterns or themes become clear. The first is the ways in which trial and error and human imagination and creativity are adopted, in particular relation to understanding land and place as sites of renewal. Secondly, the notion of collaboration and connecting expertise (sometimes with unlikely alliances) is a common tool utilised across the studies and thirdly, the sharing of knowledge or developing a body of knowledge and theory from and of place.

Before a further interrogation of these interconnected patterns and themes are discussed, it is important to look at the studies and how innovation is framed against the current status quo for rural education. In order to understand ‘innovation’ in light of rural education, it is important to revisit some of the issues faced by rural education and communities to better understand what is ‘new’ or transformative in this space. In short, we present some of the spaces where the new frontiers or boundaries might be forged from the challenges and opportunities.

1.3 Old Stories and New Frontiers: Innovation Against the Status Quo?

Unfortunately, the challenges for rural education identified in these chapters and more broadly, are not new and continue to be long-standing. For example, the OECD reported that the overall world population living in rural areas has declined (OECD, 2016). This change is one of the factors that has had significant impact on rural school funding (Johnson & Zoeller, 2016; Stelmach, 2011). Funding challenges are connected to difficulties recruiting and retaining rural educators (Sutcher et al., 2016; White & Kline, 2012) and a lack of access to specialised services for learners with special needs and diverse abilities (Cheney & Demachak, 2001; Rude & Miller, 2018). Further, rural schools may have limited access to quality staff development, mentoring and induction supports and university services for their teachers (Berry et al., 2012; Hodges, 2002). Child poverty tends to be higher in rural areas from Kenya (e.g., Okilwa, 2015) to Pakistan (e.g., Gouleta, 2015) to countries in eastern Europe (e.g., Kryst et al., 2015) to the United States (e.g., Biddle & Mette, 2017) and this
can have a significant impact on children’s learning. Furthermore, families in rural areas may lack geographic access to medical (Kiani et al., 2013), oral (Kaufman et al., 2016), social (Watt et al., 2019) and/or behavioural (Rossiter et al., 2018) health-related services.

Lack of broadband internet connectivity is also a serious challenge for many rural areas, revealed starkly within the current COVID-19 pandemic. While some rural areas have excellent internet connectivity, there are also many places where the connectivity is very poor or absent altogether. For example, in countries of the Global South, only 14% of rural areas have internet access compared to 42% in urban areas (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2020). In the United States, data indicate that 26% of people in rural areas and 32% of people in Tribal lands lack adequate broadband coverage, while only 1.7% of people in urban areas lack adequate access (FCC, 2019).

The literature is becoming indeed saturated in relation to specific rural education problem identification. Such challenges above, while clearly documented, mask some of the more nuanced social, cultural, political and increasingly environmental forces at play. As Wallin (2007) highlights, these challenges exist within a complex web of global issues. She explains:

Some of these issues arise from the social, economic, and political differences between urban and rural environments, but at the most fundamental of levels, they stem from the consequences of globalization on trade, labour relations, regulatory control, or governmental rules and guidelines. (Lutz & Neis, 2008) (p. 2)

The studies in this collection are set against such socio-geo-political forces. They have themed themselves in three sections that reflect some of these forces. Namely: the perennial issue of staffing rural schools; the challenge of meeting the needs of all students in a backdrop of schools struggling to staff particular disciplines or where rural communities are ill-prepared for supporting diverse cultural and linguistic student backgrounds and; finally, to the hidden inequities and biases that exist in policy, perspectives and indeed methodologies that are conceived from a largely metro-centric agenda. A brief outline of what the chapters each focus on is provided below to frame the later analysis of emerging innovation patterns and trends.

### 1.3.1 Staffing Rural Schools

The first theme of this collection focuses on the global issue of addressing teacher shortages for rural schools and their communities and discusses innovations in pre-service teacher education. Three different studies from diverse countries are discussed. The collection begins with a case study in rural South Africa; the next to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and finally to a comparison study of two locations in rural Australia. Across these vastly different contexts there are many similarities in the stories painted and each highlights the important role universities
and teacher educators can play in disrupting deficit thinking in relation to staffing rural school and communities.

In the opening chapter, Angela Fitzgerald, Ondine Bradbury and Tania Leach seek to address rural teacher shortages through two innovative institutional approaches discussed across two different rural locations in initial teacher education in the Australian context. They employed a community of practice approach (Lave & Wenger, 1998) to place pre-service teachers in small groups in rural schools. This was as an intentional programmatic action to further build the pre-service teachers’ relationships with their peers and ensure that a localised support network was forming to support the development of professional practice in a rural context.

Morag Redford and Lindsay Nicol also write about addressing rural teaching shortages in Scotland, writing from a rural standpoint (Roberts, 2014) themselves. They document an innovative institutional approach that seeks to embody the very mission statement of the University, “To have a transformational impact on the prospects of our region, its economy, its people and its communities (University of the Highlands and Islands, 2015, p. 8)”.

In the third chapter, Tabitha Mukeredzi introduces the South African context firstly through her own childhood experiences and then through her role as a teacher educator in designing innovative initial teacher education programmes to address teacher shortages. As with most countries, rural teacher shortages are a major issue and in South African rural schools it remains the biggest hindrance to meeting Millennium Development Goals (Masinire, 2015). Mukeredzi particularly draws on a study which investigated experiences and interpretations of rurality among 16 Bachelor of Education student teachers in one South African university, during a four-week residential teaching practice (TP) in a rural South African school. The research was part of a larger project, the Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP) which examined alternative models of TP placement to address rural school needs. This study is similar to those in rural Australia, in particular disrupting the often deficit views of pre-service teachers about rural communities (see White & Reid, 2008). The study highlights the powerful role that place can play in welcoming pre-service teachers and when combined with supportive mechanisms, reframing rurality from a strengths-based position.

1.3.2 Addressing All Students’ Needs

The second theme of the collection explores innovative responses to meeting the needs of all students and the importance of reframing deficit mindsets often held within policy reforms played out for rural students and their families. Amy Azano and Carolyn Callahan explore the notions of giftedness and rurality as social constructs and highlight the inherent bias that exists within policy and testing regimes when it comes to the relative presence or absence of a set of traits believed to differ across people or geography (for example, low socio-economic status). They specifically explore the challenges of identifying and serving gifted students in places that are
labelled ‘rural’ and ‘poor’ in America and provide a new set of assessment tools, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, to better address student learning needs.

Margaret Kettle, writing from the Australian context likewise explores inherent bias within a rural community where increased skilled migration was occurring. She documents the shifts in understanding of all stakeholders when parents, students and teachers learn from and with each other. She describes particular initiatives that included the establishment of a parent advisory group and changed workplace practices allowing parents to attend school meetings to best support students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In the third chapter in this theme, Mosebetsi Mokoena and Dipane Hlalele write from a South African perspective about a successful school enrichment programme set against the backdrop of the many challenges identified within a poor rural community which is geographically isolated, significantly under-resourced and with limited technological access. While they document a range of innovative practices that include forging new entrepreneurial school–community partnerships, they focus on the circumstances of the innovation rather than any one practice. They caution against the uniform application of case study findings and advise instead for the adaptation and tailoring of these conditions to enable thriving school enrichment programmes at rural schools.

1.3.3 Troubling Metro-Centric Policies and New Rural Methodological Tools

The last set of chapters explores and critiques policies largely framed from a metro-centric perspective and rolled out across rural communities. In a volume about innovation and rurality, it is important to explore new theories and perspectives. Philip Roberts, Peter Bodycott, Yiting Li and Xuyang (Karen) Qian bring together Australian and Chinese rural researchers. This collaboration is in itself an example of innovation and a new layer to understanding brought to bear about developing rural methodologies. They provide a fascinating exploration of rural education policy and rural perspectives in China, framed from an Australian viewpoint. The chapter references and compares two nations with similar geographic size and geography, but distinctly different national histories, cultures and populations. It introduces Fei Xiaotong, a famous Chinese sociologist and anthropologist and draws from his 1947 (translated 1992) work, translated as ‘From the Soil’ with the subtitle ‘the foundations of Chinese society’, and often regarded as the foundation of Chinese sociology. They explore the current policy and perspectives of building rural China from a philosophical and sociological perspective, broadening their discussion to other contexts.

Michael Corbett bookends the collection with a philosophically oriented chapter highlighting the importance of connecting rural education theory and philosophy to action and innovation and the need for both to grow in concert. Drawing from his
Canadian homeland, his own identity narratives and references to diverse disciplines and contexts, he offers an alternative methodological paradigm for rural education and research as an innovation itself. He discusses a theoretical approach to rural teacher education that imagines schooling as a relational enterprise where stories connect rather than diverge, supporting a movement of the field of rural education into productive conversation with the culturally responsive pedagogy movement and indigenous scholarship.

Across this global collection, what is emerging out of this backdrop are fresh ways to reclaim the rural, just as Stehlik (2001) attempted to reclaim the ‘rural’ from those analyses that position rurality in terms of deficiency or ‘lack’. She argued that: “... ‘the rural’ as something different to the urban, is a relevant distinction, one which is significant to (‘rural’) peoples identities”. (p. 1) Building from the themes, we now explore the three patterns that emerged across the eight studies. These three form a ‘tripartite’ set that contributes to the grand narrative as part of a hopeful and resilient stance in rural education. In this collection what surfaces is the essence of an emerging connection of people, place and power. We explore these as keys to rural education innovation.

1.4 Keys to Successful Innovation? Emerging Patterns

In looking across the innovation represented in these studies, three particular patterns emerged. The first, ‘place-attentive strategies’ was a common approach adopted across many of the studies. This type of approach builds from the earlier work of environmental educators who positioned ‘place’ in the school curriculum as key to building a sustainable future. Likewise, in relation to rural education, knowing, valuing and learning from ‘place’ is a key innovation tool that many of the studies used to build greater awareness and care for rural locations. Place in this context, however, extends beyond learning about the land and geography of any one place and includes knowing the diversity of people and the ways in which the place itself functions.

The connection of place to people and people to people—is the second pattern that emerged and involved the key innovation tool of forming alliances which could contribute to new visions of the future and the resources needed to bring those ideas to reality. This was a strategy which required an investment of time to build the relationships which generated the shared understandings, commitments and responsibilities.

These new connections to people and place, in turn brought power in new forms. This third element rounds out the final pattern involved as a key innovation tool of repositioning the state of being rural, adding power to influence policy and practice. The researchers drew from an important set of social and spatial theories to retell rural narratives from a different, but not deficit, perspective. This empowering stance was key to successful innovation. Figure 1.1 highlights these three ‘P’s’ of the connecting
patterns of place, people and power, which are then further discussed in the sections below.

1.4.1 Place-Attentive Strategies

“Places make us: as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621). Place-based education arose at the turn of the twenty-first century as a way to reawaken an interest in and care for, the environment. Gruenewald (2003), coming from an environmental education perspective, raised awareness about the importance of ‘place-based’ and ‘place-conscious’ pedagogies as a way for teachers to help children and young people reconnect to nature and care for the sustainability of the world. This involved a re-engagement with the world outside of the classroom as a curriculum, at a time where such activities were viewed as not academically relevant. As Tooth & Renshaw, (2009) noted: “There has been a failure in modern educational discourse to take the ‘out-doors’, ‘place’ and ‘place identity’ seriously, and to see their key relevance and importance for mainstream education” (p. 96).

Place-based education has been designed to help to reposition the natural world and the importance of embodied practice as key tools in ensuring the sustainability of the planet. What some would argue as simple pleasures of going out into the world and discovering and wondering at the seasons, animal lifecycles and learning about human impact can be seen as vital teaching tools. In this way, researchers describe the reconnection of the mind and body as key to place-based education. They explain:

It is this reconnecting with the world through the body, where knowledge is embodied experientially, physically and sensually over time that is allowing a new kind of pedagogy to emerge that is ideally suited to the age of sustainability. We endorse this focus on the physicality of place as a basis for a new kind of teaching and learning because it offers
This same concept of ‘placed-based’ emerged as an innovation tool for rural education but with a broader focus on knowing a place. As White and Reid (2008) describe:

Place-based pedagogies foreground the local and the known. They allow teachers to structure learning opportunities that are framed as meaningful and relevant to their students because they are connected to their own places, to people and to the popular cultures and concerns that engage them (Comber, Reid, & Nixon, 2007). Place-conscious pedagogies are more interested in developing and projecting awareness outward toward places (Gruenewald, 2003) beyond the immediate and the local, with a clear and articulated sense of the relationship of the local to the global, and of the social lifeworld to the natural environment. (p. 6)

Place-attentiveness is a relatively new term in rural education, extending from the notions of place-based and place-conscious but elevating the standpoint of those to pay close attention to all aspects of place using a rural social space model (Reid et al., 2010). It is a term that encompasses a valuing of the physical place, the diversity of people in and connected to the place, and an understanding of how the place itself affords an agentive tool for educators to use as a teaching tool, framing place with power. It is the framing of ‘place’ in this way that many of the chapters refer to as crucial to their innovation. Mokoena and Hlalele, writing from their South African rural perspective in this book note the importance of: “re-presenting rural places as a source of wealth and strength and as delicate environments that require innate stewardship (Corbett, 2015)”.

In short, the innovation of place-attentiveness is ‘getting to know a place and letting it speak’; letting the place speak to the innovation and the diversity of voices to be heard in and for place. Being immersed in the place appears to be an innovation tool to best know the place. As Fitzgerald, Bradbury and Leach explain in their chapter focusing on the innovation of preparing pre-service teachers for rural contexts:

… pre-service teachers were immersed in all aspects of teaching and living in a rural community embedded as part of their program requirements. From experiencing the establishment of classrooms at the beginning of a teaching year to exploring extracurricular opportunities and connecting with community, this program provided students with a supported holistic rural experience.

What emerged as a common theme in many of the chapters was the use of place-attentive strategies as a tool of innovation. Valuing ‘community’ and ‘place’ thus becomes a way to counteract this issue in ‘situated’ ways that highlight the importance of local knowledges and diverse perspectives. As the work of Johnson et al. (2005) has shown, getting to know a place often involves seeing, and responding to the people in it, differently. As Azano and Callahan, writing about supporting gifted students in relatively low socio-economic rural United States, highlight:

Place is also used to consider the diversity of rural places and the affordances for meaning making when students are given the opportunity to connect curricula with places they care about. In this way, we aim to use place as curricular intervention as a means of dialogue about the interactions between environments and education.
Themes from the chapters regarding how innovative efforts in rural education can and have worked, stress the importance of understanding and attending to the land and place. Particular attitudes towards place also emerged, key words such as value, respect, appreciate and honour reflect the particular mind-set required.

Inquiry was another approach to place that was adopted by the various projects. What also emerged as successful innovations were those where the place and the people were connected to others. What emerged were reciprocal relationships and opportunities. The place had a voice and through an open conversation and mentoring offered insights into how to enter and experience place. As Mukeredzi, writing about pre-service teacher education for rural communities in South Africa, also notes: “Mentoring makes an effective vehicle for professional learning through reflection as students learn about the ‘self’ in context”. There appears a growing trend to address issues and challenges in rural education by better attending to place. Innovation lies in place-conscious and attentive practices that can require changes in the physical or embodied places of learning. Kettle, writing in the Australian context about a rural community and the various support mechanisms for refugee students demonstrates the keys to success were where schools recognised, “that engagement with rural-based multilingual immigrant family’s needs to be contextualised and differentiated, with foundations in trust and care”. This approach enabled “sharing of responsibility at the individual level, irrespective of privilege, to come together as agents in collective action for change”.

However, as Corbett in this text also cautions:

The challenge at this stage is not to retreat into some form of placed based educational practices that celebrate the insularity, particularity and even exceptionalism of particularly rural places. Rather what is needed is a clear and honest recognition of the politics, histories of violence and exploitation and uneven development that have characterised the development of settler societies particularly, but also the development of the global concentration of power and privilege in the equally unevenly resourced and structured global cities. (Sassen, 1991)

1.4.2 Joined Up Alliances and New Vision of Community

One of the common patterns that emerged from the studies was the powerful tool of forming alliances—not always those most likely. This strategy is difficult in many ways as it requires the investment of time to build shared understandings and develop shared responsibilities, but the efforts can reap rich rewards. For example, Mokoena and Hlalele detail the key to their innovation through the formation of various partnerships, for example, between schools and businesses, as well as between schools in the same district that might have traditionally been perceived as competitive. They note:

The conversations that made rounds in the community resulted in one of the co-researchers convincing one local business person to sponsor the program. This had a snowball effect because other local businesses made donations to the school. Another factor that contributed to the successful formation of positive partnership was the close working relationships which the HoDs (co-researchers) and teachers (co-researchers) had with other teachers and HoDs
from the nearby school. This resulted in these schools sharing resources such as discs and books, and in learners exchanging information with learners from the other school. In addition, the positive working relationship between the principals of the two schools facilitated the success of the partnership.

In other studies, the partnerships were formed between the community and the school. For example, Kettle documents the growing awareness through the research study itself of the needs of migrant workers and their students. Once all parties understood and were focused on a shared endeavour, the partnership gained more meaning. She explains:

the emerging connections between the school and migrant families appear built on tentative but growing trust forged out of contact and communication. There is a shared responsibility by all stakeholders to participate in the forums directed at improving the students’ outcomes at school.

Throughout many of the chapters, the important role that a University can play in a partnership becomes clear. While some of the universities were in regional locations, many were in urban settings. The case studies highlight that when university resources can be harnessed for rural communities, these communities can flourish. The University of the Highlands and Islands is an example of a whole institution putting its focus on rural communities. As noted by Redford and Nicol, this phenomenon came about due to the alliance of the government, education institutions and teaching unions. They refer specifically to the Scottish Government policy:

The Commission report to Government in 2013 included the following recommendation in relation to ITE, ‘Local authorities, the Scottish Government, teaching institutions and trade unions should work together to explore innovative solutions to reduce the barriers to teaching in remote areas’. (Scottish Government, 2013, p. 7)

In many ways committing to stewardship of the wealth and strength of rural places also requires a tipping of power bases to new models of partnership and away from a metro-centric power base. In many of the chapters, the positioning of the researcher and the researched is based on equality and partnership between these stakeholders in the quest to construct knowledge. While aimed at striking a balance between roles played by the researcher and the researched, this kind of relationship further enhances self-liberation and emancipation by the marginalised people (Mahlomaholo and Nkoane, 2002). As noted by Mokoena and Hlalele:

such positioning removes from the researcher the sole responsibility of emancipating the marginalised communities (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013). As a result, the researched are recognised as co-researchers with meaningful participation rather than objects at the researcher’s disposal to use and construct knowledge for.
1.4.3 Repositioning Policy and Practice as Power

While the previous two patterns highlight the importance of place and people in rural education theory and practice innovation, the third pattern that emerged from these chapters is in the ways the studies approached and positioned the state of being rural as powerful and authoritative. These chapters connect and illuminate how a set of social and spatial theories can be employed as a powerful collective to afford a different (not deficit) retelling of rural narratives. The power demonstrated in these chapters is not an external force or authority to control and direct others. Rather, the power and leadership revealed here extends beyond the reach of a formal hierarchical structure. Rather, this power and leadership is the influence, direction and creativity derived from deep rural identity and knowledge, and enacted to inform and interpret policy and practice in alignment with the vision, commitment and values of rural stakeholders.

While previous policies and practices have often “evolved in response to an assumed rural deficit” (Roberts, et al., this volume), these chapters demonstrate the power and authority inherent in the state of being rural through an *agentic* stance (Bandura, 2001)—a position from which rural residents and researchers engage in deliberate, proactive efforts to develop and test innovative approaches to address current inequities. From this standpoint, individual and community agency is power. This power is enacted when rural residents and researchers, who recognise and appreciate the complex realities, strengths and inequities in their communities, work together to develop cohesive and coordinated practices attuned to the context and goals of the local rural community. Through this process, power can be used to build community capacity to design a course of action to reduce inequity and recalibrate programmes to better meet the complex demands of our times.

Connected to this is the notion of identity within community, Roberts, et al. explicate Fei Xiaotong’s philosophy and identity of people and place and introduce us to the foundational values that rural represents as ‘from the soil’. They explain:

> Fei creates a description of social relations on various planes about kinship and social obligations to those closest to oneself. In this understanding, social relations are grounded on respect, tradition, and self-management. That is, values and good character come from inside an individual, not external regulation. Indeed, in many ways, the individual does not exist; they only exist in relation to others to whom they have an obligation. Power exists in, and through, the community through observing these values.

This notion of identity connected to community and the power shifts that occur between the two in rural communities is consistent with this position and are approaches that recognise and elevate the voice (and thus power) of the participants. Many of the studies utilised particular methodologies and research approaches that involved a participatory approach to either the research or the innovation itself. For example, in the case study provided by Kettle, the community is brought together to better understand and align students, their families and the school communication. She notes the use of: “a participatory approach to make visible the experiences of a
rural high school community experiencing considerable social and cultural change as a result of growing migrant enrollments”.

Likewise, Mokoena and Hlalele explain a particular methodological approach appropriate to positioning the rural community. They utilise Participatory Action Research as it places collaborative and mutual relationships at its centre as a way to enhance participation in the construction of knowledge. They further outline:

Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodology anchors this chapter due to its participatory nature. PAR operationalises Critical Emancipatory Research (CER) as a theoretical lens to ensure partnership and equal participation all stakeholders such as parents, teachers, learners and other officials in the Department of Basic Education (DBE) investigating circumstances under which School Enrichment Programs (SEP) may thrive with the ultimate aim of enhancing these programs for sustainable learning at rural schools.

Fitzgerald, Bradbury and Leach also draw on a particular approach that connects community. They use a Community of Practice approach that centralises Community as a willingness to be an active and contributing member required from all stakeholders and an understanding that, in this context specifically, this stretches beyond the classroom to relationships with peers, school colleagues and the broader rural community.

Consistent with this approach are the types of practices whereby pre-service teachers are positioned within the community and given a range of informal opportunities and more formally designed experiences to support learning and growth with a particular focus on developing not only capacity in the classroom, but also the development of social competencies. Likewise, Mukeredzi explains how structured collaborative conversations were intended to offer students an additional supportive layer to their discussions and individual reflections on their rural TP experiences.

The power and influence demonstrated throughout these chapters are the result of a deep commitment by all stakeholders to taking steps towards more equitable rural futures. This power is the result of developing a shared vision, not of what is easy or convenient, but rather a vision of what is possible, of what can be, undistorted by cynicism.

1.5 Conclusion

As we conclude this chapter, we return to the urgent questions that were the impetus for this book: What emerges when the words rural, education and innovation are all connected? Are there trends and/or patterns of rural education innovation that emerge looking at studies from across multiple global rural places and spaces? What can such an investigation offer rural education researchers and the education profession?

We believe that across the world, “rural researchers should challenge those who speak about the rural disparagingly or only in terms of despair” (Reid et al., 2010, p. 262). We offer the chapters in this book as examples of a hopeful and resilient approach to innovative rural education, theory and scholarship, and important evidence to speak against an often deficit view of rural education. The collection
has been presented in three themes that showcase examples of innovative approaches to addressing rural staffing challenges, addressing diverse student needs in rural contexts and reframing policy that positions rural at the heart of community. It also highlights the three patterns that emerged across the studies, namely: the importance of place-attentive strategies; the importance of joined up alliances to maximise resources and networks; and finally, the need for any rural initiative or approach to utilise alternative methodologies and frameworks that start with appreciation of difference, rather than deficit.

As we work to upend the status quo in rural education across the world through the development of innovation responsive to place and context, we believe the tripartite of place, people and power can be distilled as essential to any rural education innovation. While the specific studies can not necessarily be transplanted or adopted wholesale, these three essential elements are a true foundation for future rural studies and scholars to explore. And finally, we believe that there is great value in learning from one another. Indeed, in the words of the poet Wendell Berry, “it is not from ourselves that we will learn to be better than we are” (Berry, 2003, p. 29). This highlights the importance of continuing to learn from more countries, contexts and scholars (e.g. Corbett and Gereluck 2020) and to connect with one another across the global rural education community through scholarly initiatives such as ISFIRE (International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education) and REIRA (Rural Education International Research Alliance). Through these international examples of innovative approaches to rural education, we hope you will be inspired to continue to contribute to the hope and resilience of the future of your rural places.

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