

Rural Education Provision: Insights from Malaysia and Australia

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Abstract

An analysis of government policies on educational provision in New South Wales and Malaysia for rural children. The impact of programs on school organisation, curriculum delivery and teacher training are examined. Issues of educational disadvantage and sustainability of programs are examined as a basis for recommending actions that can improve the quality of education for rural students.

Introduction

Providing access to schooling for students in rural locations is a challenge that faces governments throughout the world. In this paper we will examine how the New South Wales Department of School Education in Australia and the Malaysian Ministry of Education have attempted to meet this challenge with a focus on school organisation, curriculum and special target programs.

Rural schools in New South Wales

Australia is a sparsely populated country. The majority of its population live along the coastal edge of the nation where most large cities are situated. Past this coastal fringe lies a remote inland region where small villages and towns are scattered along rivers, railway lines or highways. In New South Wales access to a free secular education has been a state responsibility for over 100 years. The challenge for the state has focussed on how to provide educational access for children wherever they live. In particular, in rural areas where vast distances and very low population density (eg much less than national 2 people per square kilometre average) are encountered, educational provision has historically adopted an equality notion which meant that where there was a need for a school the state would provide one. This led to the opening of a large number of small rural schools in NSW.

Current organisation of schools in New South Wales

In 1995 there were 2226 government schools operated (NSW DSE, 1996). There are five main types of schools operated: i) Primary (K-6) schools (1651 schools); ii) Central school (K-10 or K-12) (64 schools); iii) High schools (Yr. 7-12) (338 schools); iv) Schools for Specific Purposes (K-6 or K-12) (104 schools); and v) Field Studies Centres (19 schools).

Primary schools are classified into six subgroups based on school size.

P6 primary schools are the smallest with enrolments between 8 and 25 students, P5 schools have enrolments from 26 to 159, through to P1 schools which have more than 700 students. Central schools are uniquely rural. They are usually located in small rural towns (populations ranging from 300 to 2000) and provide one site education over the primary and secondary years. High schools are sparsely spread across the rural regions of New South Wales. Only 69 of 338 high schools are located on the western, rural and inland side of the coastal mountain range.

Federal government policy on rural education

Australia has both federal and state level education departments. At the Federal level the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) is concerned with developing policy based programs of national significance. One such program that relates directly to rural schools is the Country Area Program (CAP) which is embedded within the Access Element of the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS). The Country Areas Program aims:

to assist schools and their communities to work together to improve the educational participation and achievement and personal development of students with restricted access to social, cultural and educational activities and services due to their geographic isolation. (DEET, 1996: 56)

At the national level \$15.39 million to allocated annually (DEET, 1996). The NSW sector receives \$ 3.885 million. This program has some distinctive features that require schools within a district/cluster to cooperatively plan and implement programs for the children at these schools. This sharing process involves both government and non-government schools and requires community participation in the management of programs at the school, as well as encouraging community members to participate in the program. The federal government identified priority areas for the Country Areas Program that are consistent with its equity focus and seek to redress educational disadvantage by:

- i)improving literacy and numeracy for all students with particular emphasis on the early years [of schooling];
- ii)professional development initiatives for teachers which will result in improved delivery of programs; and
- iii)initiatives to facilitate active parent involvement in programs and emphasise the role of parents in achieving optimal outcomes for students. (DEET, 1996: 188)

State government policy on rural education

For most of this century that the state level public sector education system has operated it has used the notion of equality to operate, staff, and resource rural schools. This centralised policy treated all schools, irrespective of location, the same. Teachers were appointed to schools across the state from Head Office in Sydney. Curricula were developed centrally by Sydney based experts who had little or no understanding of the particular local rural needs. But all children were given the same education. This notion of sameness was even manifest in the colour of school buildings. They were all painted the same cream colour.

More recently policy makers have acknowledged that there were inherent, implicit and significant differences between urban and rural schools. Such a realisation was then translated into how the operation of all facets of educational provision were managed. This acknowledgement reflected a shift in emphasis from equality in provision to equity in outcomes. Concomitant with this shift was the need to recognise that if schools were different along many dimensions of which rurality was one, then there will be a differential operating and management basis for a rural school compared to an urban school. Such a policy recognition happened in NSW as part of a change in the political landscape and administration of the state in 1988.

In NSW the Rural Schools Plan (Metherell, 1989) was the first specific triennial policy for rural schools. This program set out to:

- i) ensure access to schooling as near as practicable to the students' homes;
- ii) increase retention of rural students at school;
- iii) improve the quality of education for rural students. (Metherell, 1989:2)

This was followed by the Rural Education and Training Plan (Chadwick, 1993) which built upon the earlier policy document and sought to:

- i) provide equitable, quality education and training for rural students; and
- ii) assist rural students to achieve participation rates and educational outcomes at least equivalent to those of students in urban areas. (Chadwick, 1993:3)

Impact of policies on New South Wales rural schools

As a result of these federal and state policy documents, their impact on rural schools has been significant. Rural students, teachers and school communities have benefitted. Some of the effects of these

policies are described below.

i)The Country Areas Program. This program has a significant effect on social and cultural aspects of schooling. In remote areas it is very expensive to bring in a performance groups for the students to experience live theatre, drama activities, specialist artists or musician. CAP helps to provide access to these experiences for the isolated children.

ii)The Country Areas Program. In isolated areas, teachers often feel professionally isolated. Through the sharing of activities requirement within CAP, teachers meet regularly to discuss both matters relating to Country Areas Program and also use these opportunities to establish a professional network of colleagues from whom advice, support and help can be sought. This network has a significant, positive effect by reducing the feeling of being professionally isolated by the rural teacher.

iii)Decentralisation of distance education. The establishment of 11 primary and 6 secondary Distance Education Centres in rural locations within the state to bring the teacher and the isolated student into closer and more regular contact.

iv)Introduction of audiographics teleteaching. As part of the commitment to increase access to a full secondary education for rural students, initially two clusters of central schools and now five cluster were created. In these Central schools Years 11 and 12 were introduced, curriculum diversity is maintained for these students through the operation of a multi-campus senior school in which lesson are delivered via audiographics to groups of students at their home school by a teacher who may be up to 250 km away.

v)Improved staffing allocation for small schools and central schools. Principals in small primary school (P4 to P6) were given additional release time to attend to administrative duties. All central school principal positions were made non-teaching appointments. Staff in Central school were encouraged to participate in 'Whole School Staffing' which meant that teachers with particular specialisations (eg Music) could teach across the K-12 range of children.

vi)Provision of technology. All small, remote primary schools and all

central schools were provided with satellite reception facilities. Additionally, all central schools were given additional telecommunications facilities (eg telephone lines, modems, computers).

vii)Supplementary funding. As a recognition that many of the operating costs in a rural location are higher than in an urban location, each small remote rural school is provided with a per capita grant which

acknowledged the impact that geographic isolation has on the school's operating budget (eg every phonecall/fax is a long distance call) in addition to their school's annual entitlement grant (recurrent funding/budget).

It is pleasing to report that in the more recent political changes within NSW in 1995, the new Minister for Education has re-affirmed the importance of rural schooling by creating a new administrative unit within the Department of School Education known as the Rural and Distance Education Directorate which is based in the provincial rural city of Bathurst in inland NSW.

Policy outcomes and implications

In the Australian context these policies have outcomes at four levels: the student; the teacher; the school community and pre-service teacher education.

At the student level:

- i)improved access to the full range of education is available;
- ii)participation in a diverse range of curricular experiences is possible;
- iii)access to diverse social activities is enhanced; and
- iv)participation in cultural experience either at school or in a different location are facilitated.

At the teacher level:

- i)collegial networks are established;
- ii)professional isolation is reduced;
- iiicloser involvement with community representatives at CAP meetings;
- iv)develop expertise in the use of telecommunications technology for delivery of lessons;
- v)opportunity to teach across the whole K-12 range is provided; and
- vi)recognition of rural schools and teaching by department of school education.

At the school community level:

- i)improved access to cultural and social activities has happened;
- ii)closer school - community links are forged; and
- iii)community members have a direct role in determining the educational activities provided to their children.

At the pre-service teacher education level:

- i)the challenge to prepare teachers for rural appointments; and
- ii)the inclusion of courses that provide the necessary skills and expertise to teach using telecommunicated modes of delivery.

Rural Education Provision in Malaysia

Rural Schools in the Malaysian Context

Malaysia has a centralised education system. Central control is deemed necessary in view of the conviction that education can contribute importantly towards intergrating its multi-ethnic population. In addition, scarcity of resources - as experienced in most Third World countries - makes central planning a more sensible choice economically.

As noted in the Cabinet Committee Report (1979), 'The centralised education system ensures optimal use of physical resources and available expertise in the education sector as well as prevent wasteful duplication of duties. Thus responsibility for the administration of the entire education system rests with the Ministry of Education (MOE), with an administrative machinery that exists at four hierarchical levels: national, state, district or division, and school levels.

There is no separate provision for rural education in Malaysia, since the government's overriding objective of achieving national unity has necessitated the implementation of a common curriculum for all schools.

However, even though education in the rural areas is treated as part and parcel of the overall education system, several measures have been taken that indicate the government's concern for rural education. In this respect MOE is not the only agency dealing with the matter; other agencies involved in educating the rural people include the Ministry of National and Rural Development, The Council of Trust for Indigenous People (MARA) and the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA). Thus, in terms of programs to address the problems of rural education, our definition of rural education is not confined to education in rural areas but necessarily encompasses education for rural students, irrespective of the regions in which their schools or institutions are located.

In its latest proposal to raise the performance of rural schools (MOE/EPRD, 1996), MOE identifies five categories of 'rural' schools based on basic facilities, communication and parental socio-economic status. These categories are:

- i) Remote schools - schools in isolated areas, having no infrastructure and basic facilities.
- ii) Traditional village schools - schools in traditional Malay villages, having moderate infrastructure but the socio-economic status of the population is still low.
- iii) Planned settlement schools - schools in estates and other areas of planned agricultural activities, run by agencies such as FELDA.

iv) Sub-urban schools - schools neighbouring town areas, endowed with facilities and good infrastructure but the socio-economic status of the population is low.

v) High-risk schools - schools in urban or sub-urban areas, with low academic achievement, disciplinary problems and a majority of students from low socio-economics background.

Based on the above categories, 84.3% of primary schools in Malaysia are classified as rural schools; at the secondary level, the percentage of rural schools is 5.1%.

Table 1: Number of Rural Primary and Secondary Schools, 1995

School category	Primary	Secondary
Remote Schools	994	0
Traditional Village	1,354	0
Planned Settlement		1,524 20
Suburban Schools		1,823 379
High Risk Schools		150 155
Total	5,845	554

Source: MOE/EPRD, 1996, p.4

Problem Areas

One of the most persistent problems facing rural education is underachievement. Early in the 1970s findings of a comprehensive and large-scale study (Dropout Report, 1973) indicated that the dropout rate at the lower secondary level was much higher among rural students (72%) as compared to urban students (53%). Data from the same study

showed that urban Malay students generally performed better than their rural counterpart (Isahak Haron, 1983).

In terms of achievement in specific subjects, rural pupils are found to perform poorly in English, Mathematics and Science. For example, in 1988 the Lower School Certificate (SRP) examination result of a state in Malaysia recorded that the percentage of failure in English in rural schools is almost 50% (Azizah and Sharifah, 1992). Likewise a study by Rosli and Edwin (1988) found that there were clear and significant differences in the English proficiency level of rural and urban Form 4 students. Their sample of 1,004 students from eight rural and eight urban schools indicated that the majority of rural students who obtained passes in the SRP did so at the credit and pass levels whereas the majority of urban students achieved distinction.

A comparison of the performance of rural and urban schools in the subjects Bahasa Melayu, English, Mathematics and Science based on the percentage that passed national examinations in 1994 is shown below (Table 2).

Table 2: Performance of Rural and Urban Schools in National Examinations, 1994

Examination	Prim. School Evaluation		Lower Second Exam.			
	School Cert. Exam.	Subject	Urban	Rural	Urban	
Rural	Urban	Urban	Rural	Rural	Urban	
B. Melayu	80.5	79.8	84.2	89.2	77.2	90.8
English	76.8	68.4	42.9	48.6	54.2	22.7
Mathematics		70.0		61.6		58.3

towns where they felt that their experience would be enriched and their 'ability' as teachers could really be tested.

Teachers were also not satisfied with their student's academic ability, attitudes toward study, attendance and health conditions. They attributed these problems to lack of parental involvement and unstimulating environment. Our study also revealed that rural teachers were concerned over their ability to carry out community activities, teach children of varied abilities and about 33% of respondents agreed that their teacher training did not prepare them to teach in rural areas.

The MOE (1996) admits that there is a dire shortage of trained and experienced rural teachers and the presence of mismatch especially for the subjects English Language, Mathematics and Science. Mismatch occurs when teachers teach subjects that are not their options.

Other problems of concern faced by rural schools are the lack of basic facilities such as books, AVA, workbooks and computers. In 1995 16.2% of primary schools have at least one multigrade classroom. Teachers teaching multigrade classrooms face problems of class management and teaching pupils of varied abilities. Small schools face the problem of shortage of teachers. In schools with less than 70 pupils enrolled, often there are less teachers deployed compared to the number of subjects offered.

Rural teachers face the problem of isolation and lack of professional development. Our study (Azizah & Sharifah, 1993) found that almost half of the respondents had never attended inservice courses. They lamented that particulars regarding the courses often came too late. The study also revealed that 49% of the respondents were dissatisfied with their promotion prospects.

Programmes for Rural Students

In the effort to promote the education of rural children, several programmes have been instituted by MOE and other agencies. The provision of accommodation during the school terms through the establishment of residential schools is one such programme. Residential schools are schools which selectively enrol pupils with excellent examination results. Deliberate attempts are made to enable bright pupils from rural areas to attend these schools. Except for 4 of the 12 residential schools, the ratio for intake into these schools is 30% urban and 70% rural. Socioeconomic status of pupils as well as their grades in national examinations are criteria for intake.

There are also Residential Science Schools set up by the Council of Trust for Indigenous People (MARA). These schools too take in students from rural areas, the criteria for entry being examination grades and socioeconomic background.

Besides the fully residential schools, some hostel facilities are provided in towns either as separate establishment or attached to large secondary schools. Through this arrangement students from out of town are able to take advantage of the better facilities found in established urban schools.

About ten years ago another measure taken to improve rural education has been the setting up of rural hostels for children of the

chronically poor (parents whose income is less than RM300 per month) at the primary as well as secondary levels of schooling throughout the country. Twenty seven such hostels were initially built in the rural state of Kelantan in 1986. Each hostel was built on a 'gotong royong' (self-help) basis with a grant of MR50,000 from MOE. Built with the help of the villagers themselves, each hostel can accommodate approximately fifty pupils. The setting up of these hostels has solved the problem faced by rural parents who can ill afford their children's bus fare to school. In addition, the hostels provide the diet greatly needed by poor rural children and generally provide a more conducive environment for learning.

Another programme which assists poor students generally is the Textbook Loan Scheme launched in 1975. This programme ensures that disadvantaged pupils have access to the textbooks prescribed for their class, for teachers invariably use textbooks to facilitate learning. Originally students from families whose monthly income was less than MR500 were eligible for the textbooks but the ceiling was raised to MR1,000 in 1988. As rural parents generally earn less than MR500 monthly, this scheme has undoubtedly been a great help and contributed towards facilitating rural schooling.

Attention has been given to the problem of poor nutrition. A study conducted by the Malaysian Institute of Medical Research highlighted the low level of nutrition of pupils in the rural areas of Kota Bharu, Mersing, Baling and Perak Tengah as compared to urban pupils in Petaling Jaya (Sahari, 1988 cited in Azizah and Sharifah, 1992). Poor nutrition was associated with poor health generally, which led to frequent absenteeism, poor performance and lack of achievement in schools. A pilot project known as Supplementary Food Programme was carried out in the state of Selangor in 1974. It was coordinated by the Prime Minister's Department in 1976 to cover Peninsular Malaysia, and by 1979 it was taken over by MOE in order to extend the programme to the whole nation. It has been reported that since the introduction of this programme the percentage of attendance in schools has improved (ibid).

Beside the programmes mentioned above, the government also assists rural students financially by giving deserving students small amounts

of scholarship to cover expenses other than textbooks and accommodation. Many bright rural students have been selected to attend residential schools in areas away from their villages.

Other measures taken to address the problem of under-achievement among rural students have been in the form of projects targetted at actual teaching and learning in the rural schools (Azizah et al., 1996). One of the earliest projects was INSPIRE (Integrated System of Programmed Instruction for Rural Environment, 1977 - 1986), funded jointly by IDRC and the Malaysian government. This project sought to improve teaching and learning in rural schools by providing curriculum packages and various teaching aids.

Another project was the Multiple-Class Teaching Project in Sabah (KABAS), funded by the Van Leer Foundation for three years beginning in 1980. Designed specifically for under-enrolled schools, the project produced materials and trained teachers to conduct multigrade teaching.

To raise the achievement of rural students in English, a project was introduced in Sabah in 1985. This project known as RUPEP (Rural Primary English Project), is carried out with assistance from the British Council through its Overseas Development Administration (ODA), and seeks to develop materials and teaching strategies for English to

raise the level of achievement of students in the project schools.

The Educational Technology Division of MOE, too, has attempted to contribute towards improving the achievement of rural primary pupils. Like Project INSPIRE mentioned earlier, its focus is the production and dissemination of teaching-learning materials to be used by teachers in rural primary schools, in the belief that it will improve the quality of teaching and thereby raise the level of student achievement.

Mention must also be made of several activities carried out since 1993 with funding from the World Bank, particularly under the PIER (Programme for Innovation, Excellence and Research) Project. These include the teaching of Mathematics and Science, Multiple-Class Teaching in small/under-enrolled schools, distance education, teacher training and research. The World Bank funding is scheduled to be terminated by the end of 1996. It is as yet too early to gauge the impact of these PIER activities on rural education.

It is obvious that although there were several programmes and projects, in the past the government did not have any special policy for rural education. Recently (April 1996), however, MOE tabled a paper entitled 'Programme to Raise the Performance of Rural Schools' at a meeting of the national Educational Planning Committee. It proposes an 'intervention model' encompassing: (a) teachers, (b) student and the curriculum, (c) school resource and organization, and (d) society and

environment. Thus the outlook appears to be better now and perhaps there will be some changes in policy.

Impact of Programmes and Projects

It is difficult to state clearly the impact of various government programmes and projects on the academic achievement of rural children because, to date, there are not many research studies carried out to evaluate them. Nevertheless it is obvious that rural students placed in residential schools have performed well and achieved success in various professional fields. Over the years this proof of success has led to an increase in the number of fully residential schools as parents vie to secure a place for their children.

A write up on rural hostels in the national newspapers suggest that the conducive environment at the hotels have increased the academic attainment of the pupils.

Projects such as INSPIRE and KABAS which ended in 1986 and 1983 respectively were evaluated by the planners as successful at that time.

Findings of our study (Azizah et. al 1996) however, indicated that currently there seems to be very little impact in terms of the usage of INSPIRE materials in the schools studied (in Peninsular Malaysia) and KABAS materials in Sabah. Instructional materials from both projects are deemed to be obsolete by teachers because of the introduction of a new primary curriculum, KBSR, since 1983.

Our study also shows that teachers teaching multigrade classrooms feel incompetent to teach in these classrooms. Apparently after KABAS there were no programmes to train teachers specifically for multigrade classroom. It is only of late (1995) that interest in multigrade teaching has been revived through workshops and seminars.

Thus we find that the two projects lack sustainability as there were no inbuilt mechanism to sustain it after the expiry of the projects. The high turn over rate of personnel involved in the projects, termination of fundings and waning official support are some of the reasons

identified for the failure of these projects to produce ripple effects.

Ongoing projects such as MESRE and RUPEP have shown some positive impact, although their sustainability is yet to be seen. Schools with MESRE projects have increased the number of library books and students are encouraged to read. We found that in the case of RUPEP, the availability of funds, full official support (from the Education Department), effective networking and training of facilitators have contributed to its success. More rural teachers are being trained to teach English.

Our study also found that materials sent to rural schools by the Educational Technology Division of MOE was underutilized by teachers in the schools studied. Teachers in these schools seldom use the materials provided as they found them to be too small, impractical and difficult to store. They prefer to make their own materials or buy them as they are more relevant to the students' needs. The same was also true regarding teachers' perception of INSPIRE materials.

Implications

In the foregoing pages we have presented the problems faced by rural education in Malaysia and the various programmes undertaken by the government as well as projects carried out by agencies with the cooperation of MOE, all of which are aimed at improving rural education. As we have also seen, the impact of these programmes and projects are somewhat limited. This implies that a great deal more need to be done for rural education.

Of utmost importance is the establishment of a national policy on rural education. Such a policy will ensure that there will be a definite funding for rural education in the annual budget. This special fund can be utilised for various improvement programmes, such as uplifting the context (better classroom environment, more resource materials, autonomy for teachers to buy materials, etc.), ensuring teacher training encompasses rural teaching, availability of funds for key personnel to visit and provide guidance as well as provide support for isolated teachers, provide proper housing for rural teachers and incentives for their commitment to serve in rural areas, structure programmes for parental education and involvement, and a host of other activities to improve rural education.

As mentioned earlier, projects designed to improve the academic performance of rural children floundered when the external funding ceased to be available. The establishment of a special fund for rural education from the government should ensure the continuity of such projects.

Conclusion

From this overview of rural education policy, practice and provision in Australia and Malaysia, the following points are made.

First, policy makers need to acknowledge that providing education to rural locales automatically requires a recognition of the differences. These differences recognise the educational differences that are related to local needs and must include geographic, social and cultural considerations.

Second, programs that bring rural teachers and community members together to discuss their shared commitment to providing a quality

education for their children need to be sustained.

Third, programs that reduce teacher professional isolation are essential as a means of attracting and retaining rural teachers for extended periods of time.

Finally, there is a responsibility on teacher education institutions to prepare thoroughly their prospective teachers for rural appointments. Part of this preparation should include the ways in which technology is being used or can be used to deliver lessons.

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1*The study was carried out in 1992, involving 25 rural national primary schools in a district in Kelantan. The sample was 287 (30%)

primary teachers in the district, and 24 principals.
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