Emphasising Space and Policy for Rural-Regional Sustainability: A Focus on Education

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Abstract

Some educational theorists have suggested recently that educational theory would benefit from adopting spatial theories to inform knowledge of educational processes and practices (Gulson & Symes, 2007a, p. 98). Indeed, by framing this discussion around rural-regional sustainability, foregrounding space is inescapable, for the term ‘rural-regional’ is itself a spatial construction. A spatial question requires a spatial answer, and this paper will investigate the relationship between space and education in inland NSW through an exploration of educational policy and educational spatial practices.

As with other public-sector organizations, the education system can be conceptualised as an explicitly spatial endeavour. In NSW, the Department of Education and Training (DET) has responsibility for delivering public education and training from early childhood to the senior secondary level, and beyond (i.e. TAFE). These services are delivered spatially, through structures like classrooms, schools, offices and departmental buildings; through various policies that imagine and conceptualise space, such as education regions, clusters and future plans; through resources that flow across space, such as materials, money and people (e.g. teacher recruitment); and through knowledge transfers across space via meetings, conferences, research reports and everyday discourse. Such considerations will be briefly compared with the spatial conceptions of two other professional practice fields, health and policing. In each instance, defining and territorialising space is a key component of imagining and practicing space, yet each field organises space differently. By exploring spatial conceptions in other fields, we can imagine new ways of conceiving (educational) space.

The paper will explore notions of space and education for rural-regional sustainability by focusing on the administration of NSW’s large, sparsely-populated inland rural areas. Drawing on concepts of territoriality and policy discourse, it will investigate how education practices are sustained across these large, open spaces through a system of administrative units currently called DET Regions. These regions constitute a particular conception of space, a conception rendered through policy and implemented through educational practice in space. Although these spaces are arbitrarily imagined spaces, their effects on practice are nonetheless real. They structure our understanding of what space is, how to define it, how to work in and with it. One question this paper will seek to answer is why are DET Regions arranged and defined as they are? Why, in NSW, are there ten Regions, of which three would be considered inland NSW? Why not more than ten or less? By what discursive process were these regions formed, and how does this discourse affect educational practices through the spaces of education?

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Introduction: Space as Representation

Space is a problem. I don’t mean that it’s a problem that can be fixed with a ‘solution’. It is not a problem in the same way that drug-taking or crime is a problem, where the end point is the elimination of said problem. On the contrary, it is an enduring problem, requiring perpetual negotiation, management and strategy. The spatial problematic cannot be eliminated. It is a fundamental aspect of our very existence. Humans are, and always will be, embodied spatial beings.

Conceptualising space as a problem is a useful tool for critically analysing the spatial aspects of many fields of inquiry, a fact increasingly acknowledged by those engaged in the recent so-called spatial turn in sociology (see Cloke, Philo, & Sadler, 1991; Crang & Thrift, 2000; Gulson & Symes, 2007b; Hubbard, Kitchin, Bartley, & Fuller, 2002; Hubbard, Kitchin, & Valentine, 2004; Kostogriz, 2006; Massey, 2005; Peet, 1998; Warf & Arias, 2008). In education, some theorists have also suggested that educational theory would benefit from adopting spatial theories to inform knowledge of educational processes and practices (Gulson & Symes, 2007a, p. 98). This symposium is partaking in one such critical engagement in space, with a focus on rural-regional areas. This spatial representation is a powerful one in Australia, signifying open spaces, low population densities, the ‘bush’ and farming practices, and is the antithesis of its binary, the urban, in a variety of cultural, demographic and economic ways.

But beyond the representational, in what ways can rural-regional space be said to ‘exist’? As an object of study, can we see it and experience it? Can we draw a line on a map to differentiate the rural-regional from the urban? I don’t believe that we can. The ‘rural-regional’ exists as a representational space, a construction through which we analyse and understand our various research interests, which in this case is education.

This is not to say that the rural-regional construction is wrong; on the contrary, it is these representational spaces that are pivotal to understanding how spaces are produced in various fields of human endeavour. Our understanding of space is drawn from our various means of representing space. Society creates representational spaces. We cannot understand space without first representing it to ourselves. Space as representation. Space is representation. As social beings who must come to terms with our spatial embodiment, we create these representations in our minds, through our bodies and in our discourses. The urban/rural-regional dichotomy is a representational distinction given life through repetition in the various discourses covering rural and regional Australia. There’s no line on a map that separates these two categories; just discursive differences as to what these categories mean.

All people working in rural-regional research are thus engaging with a particular prism of representational space, through which we will make certain truth claims. Indeed, many commentators will debate each other’s truth claims without recognising the shifting ground upon which space itself is represented. As Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 92) noted, “space is neither subject nor object”. How space is subjectified or objectified is what interests me in my research\(^1\) – how space is being rendered through representation, as knowledge and as practice. For Lefebvre, it is these very renderings that open up how space is produced. Drawing on Hegel’s dialectical approach, Lefebvre wanted to discover, for want of a better word, the hypercomplexity of space by recognising the competing representations, ideologies and practices of space. He argued that an analytic distinction be made between physical space (spatial practices), mental space (representations of space) and social space (representational spaces), the latter of which I have already touched on with regards to the rural-regional. This ‘trialectic’ (or double dialectic) is known as a spatial triad (Halfacree, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 2000; Soja, 1996).

Using this approach helps us better understand the spaces of education, including rural-regional space/s, and how and in what ways the education system is produced and reproduced ad infinitum. For this paper I wish to draw on the two representational aspects of Lefebvre’s trialectic, representational space and representations of space, each of which situates

\(^1\) My PhD project is being conducted through the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) at Charles Sturt University. The project’s overriding aim is to investigate the relationship between space, policy and practice in the professional practice fields of education, health and policing, particularly in inland New South Wales. This paper emerges from the conceptual and theoretical work of that project.
each of us as both the ‘navigator’ in understanding space and an accomplice in the creation of mental space through our explicitly spatial representations, such as plans and policy documents.

**The Battle over Representational (Educational) Space in New South Wales**

Doreen Massey (2005) alerts us to the way that representational spaces are a battleground between competing ideologies, citing the example, amongst many others, of how conflict occurred in the docklands of England over proposals to redevelop that space into other types of land use (Massey, 2005, pp. 166-167). Gulson (2007) makes a similar point about how spatial discourses are mobilised by various groups during political debate and how these representational spaces compete with each other for dominance. In a similar vein, just as we have created a representational space, the rural-regional, through which to discuss our interests in education, other representational spaces are created by other groups. In my study of professional practice in New South Wales (NSW), one of these other groups, perhaps the most significant group, is the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), which has administrative responsibility for delivering public education and training from early childhood to the senior secondary level, and beyond (i.e. TAFE), throughout the State. These educational services are delivered spatially, through structures like classrooms, schools, offices and departmental buildings; through various policies that imagines space, such as education regions, clusters and future plans; through resources that flow across space, such as materials, money and people (e.g. teacher recruitment); and through knowledge transfers across space via meetings, conferences, research reports and everyday discourse. One aspect of the spatial nature of delivering education in NSW is the formation of DET Regions, an administrative representational space created by the DET. These DET Regions are shown on the following map.

![Map 1: DET Regions, New South Wales Department of Education and Training](source: Created using Geographic Information Systems, Thursday 31 May 2007)
DET Regions are an important aspect in how educational space is administered in NSW. “Australian education systems have an inescapable, undeniable geographical dimension: they spread across often vast territories, extending to State boundaries” (Green, 2008, p. 297). Focus for a moment on the various shapes that constitute each DET Region and the way NSW space has been ‘carved up’ to create DET Regions. Now contrast these representational spaces with the imagined space of rural-regional NSW. What differences can one see between how one might imagine rural-regional space in NSW and how space is represented on this map? The construction is different in many ways. DET Regions are numerous while ‘rural-regional’ is characterised as one half of a binary (with urban the other half). The former has hard boundaries while the latter does not (although both still exist in the representational sphere, as we are not referring to physical features in space). DET Regions are spaces explicitly linked to power, especially administrative power, while the rural-regional are spaces of discussion and issues, often conceptualised as problems to be tackled, such as attracting and retaining teachers, education equity issues and notions of sustainability (see Green & Letts, 2007; Green & Reid, 2004).

The naming practices reveal much about how these spaces are represented and interpreted. The largest DET Region geographically is Western NSW. Western NSW? Why is it called western? Certainly it occupies much of the western half of the State but it also occupies much of the north and some of the east and south. I believe it is named relationally, in that its definition and much of its identity is derived from its perception as a binary opposite to Sydney, the dominant urban centre in NSW and the location of DET’s headquarters. Such naming practices have historical links to nineteenth-century education in NSW, whereby public education systems “were conceived and organized on the basis of what can be called a metro-centric model” (Green & Letts, 2007, p. 59; emphasis in original). No doubt naming such a space as Western NSW seemed like a perfectly natural name for such a space, positioned as it is from Sydney. Far from being a pedantic complaint, analysing naming practices in space can indicate how certain power structures operate in space and how space itself is a battleground between competing ideologies. If spatial identities are being dictated from a certain urban standpoint, in what other ways is power flowing from the central power base to the peripheral territories?

Indeed, it is the territorialisation of space, this tendency towards boundary creation and carving up administrative space, that is indicative of representational spaces throughout the Western world. Francis Harvey (2006, p. 60) suggests that “over 39,000 administrative boundaries divide and subdivide the United States, geographic and political divisions resulting from the invisible work of humans and nonhumans in government administrations”. Each one is a space of representation, affecting how we think about and use space.

Despite the lack of synthesis between these competing representational spaces, to understand education in rural-regional areas requires that we must engage with, and perhaps in some cases challenge, DET’s representational spaces. From their dominant position, the spaces that DET create in education delivery structures the everyday practices of education at that scale, and policy documents, where they contain spatial aspects, often directly relate to these representational spaces. This is a challenge for educational researchers (and others) with an interest in space because to work with DET’s representations is to discard one’s one spatial reference points, to subordinate your representation to the dominant power. With space a crucial battleground of power, this might be far too high a price.

Again, let’s take DET’s Western NSW Region as our example. This is a massive area with no enduring spatial definition beyond that created by this very map. It’s almost as if Western NSW Region comprises the rest of NSW – the bits of the State that don’t quite fit into other known imaginings of space, the Sydneys, the Hunter Regions, the coastal regions, the New Englands and the Riverinas of the State. Was its identity created quite arbitrarily, perhaps? And yet, this compromised, arbitrarily-imagined space is suddenly relevant in studying education space purely by the discursive imagining of the DET. Once created, this space is real, in the sense that policy is created through this spatial prism; that practices are shaped spatially by all these particular configurations; that professional identities are moulded by communities of practice within and between these regions.
The Discursive Role of Policy in Space

As these powerful representational spaces structure how education is delivered across space, I would like to turn towards the other side of the representational coin with regards to space, to what Lefebvre referred to as representations of space. These are the discourses and ideologies reflected through policies and plans that conceive of space in ways that reflect those discourses and ideologies. They are not the same as representational spaces and the distinction is initially confusing. Lefebvre conceived of this distinction between representations of space and representational spaces for analytical purposes because each emphasises different aspects that relate to space. However, there are two differences between each concept that are useful in understanding the distinction.

Firstly, representations of space tend to occur prior to the emergence of that space. “Abstract space is conceived before it is lived” (Doel, 1999, p. 14). Space formation is a process whereby space is mentally conceived prior to its creation, either physically or representationally. DET Regions, for example, were conceived as representations of space prior to becoming spaces of representation. Secondly, the object of study regarding representations of space is the “representation”, rather than the “space”. If I am asking myself “what is that space? How is it represented?”, then I am talking about representational spaces such as rural-regionality and DET Regions. If I am asking myself “what is that text? How is it structuring space?”, then I am talking about representations of space.

For this paper I am interested in just one particular representation of space, the Office of Schools Plan 2006-2008 (hereon referred to as the ‘Plan’), and the discursive role it plays in structuring the spaces of education in NSW. The Plan is a 17-page document developed within DET that outlines:

- twenty-one key aspects of DET’s Corporate Plan Strategy;
- strategies that pertain to each aspect of the Corporate Plan Strategy;
- outcomes expected by each strategy; and
- performance indicators/targets used to determine the success or failure of each strategy.

The following figure shows the first page of the Plan (after the title page). Note the columnar organisation of the Plan’s information, with each aspect of the Corporate Plan Strategy (column 1) linked to its strategies, outcomes and performance indicators/targets (columns 2-4).
I analysed this document looking for spatial referents, with an eye to identifying how these spaces are positioned in the document and the relationship between the policy directives and space. I began by looking at the designated ‘regions’ to see how they fit within the policy’s discourse, which in turn illuminates the structural role these spaces play in delivering education to NSW. A selection of some of the Plan’s references to the ‘region’, as in the DET Region, is shown in the following table.

Table 1: Examples of ‘Region’ from the Office of Schools Plan 2006-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corporate Plan Strategy</th>
<th>Office of Schools Strategies</th>
<th>Office of Schools Outcomes</th>
<th>Office of Schools Performance Indicators/ Targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate with students, parents and local partners to elevate expectations, address core values and social needs and provide challenging experiences that set high standards for achievement</td>
<td>Establish Regional Advisory Groups to further embed the regional structure and tri-level reform process</td>
<td>Improved performance for all students</td>
<td>Improved regional average attendance rate for students K-12 each year, 2006, 2007 and 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote collaborative networks that reinforce excellence in teaching and learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced disparity in performance, especially for Aboriginal students and students from equity groups</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Office of Schools Plan 2006-2008, Page 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corporate Plan Strategy</th>
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<th>Office of Schools Performance Indicators/ Targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase cross-sectoral partnerships in education and training</td>
<td>Enhance central and regional interaction with principals’ associations for mutual benefit. Enhance and promote parent participation in policy development and in central, regional and school planning</td>
<td>Greater levels of cohesion and appreciation of work of others by DET employees in schools, regions and state office</td>
<td>Collaborative action between state office, regional officers and parent representatives towards shared goals to enhance and promote public education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use performance and financial information more effectively in planning and organisational improvement</td>
<td>State office and regional performance data to inform system planning and decision making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertake rigorous evaluation of programs and initiatives to ensure effectiveness, transferability and value for money</td>
<td>State office / regional performance data to informs system planning and decision making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote school and TAFE policies and practices that support collaboration, innovation, and evaluation of success</td>
<td>Tri-level reform implemented with regions and state office working collaboratively to deliver support to schools directed at raising the bar and closing the gap</td>
<td>Interdependent culture developed across the three levels of schools, regions and state office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Plan offers an indication of some of the activities expected to be undertaken by each region: data collecting, collaborating with other regions and interacting with the community and parents. The phrase that struck me most was the notion of ‘tri-level reform’, which relates to a model adopted by the DET for undertaking organisational change (Fullan, 2003; Fullan, Rolheiser, Mascall, & Edge, 2004). The thrust of this model is that “to get large scale reform, you need to establish and coordinate ongoing accountability and capacity-building efforts at three levels – the schools, the district, and the state” (Fullan et al., 2004, p. 4). The Office of Schools Plan 2006-2008 attempts to codify these ideals into action, and then furthermore into practice, with its advocacy of developing an interdependent culture.

Most evident, though, is the reduction of educational space to measurable attributes of performance indicators and targets. In this light the State of NSW is reduced to ten competing spatial entities, geo-statistical groupings known only by the various numbers associated with student performance, attendance rates, capacity-building rates and other measurable scores. Lefebvre (1991) argued that this reductionist stance is typical of many planners and scientists, with space conceived as a technical rather than a social or political entity. Hence space becomes known as a mathematical abstract rather than a lived environment.

The Representational Spaces of Other Professional Practice Fields

The Office of Schools Plan 2006-2008 represents only one of many such representations of space in policy, and even then I have touched only briefly on some of its spatial themes. My PhD project is asking these questions more generally about professional practice, and for comparative purposes I am also investigating the professional practice fields of health and policing, each of which has its own administrative units, practice research community, policy documents and so on.

The Department of Health, for example, has eight Area Health Services (AHS). The following map shows the current layout of AHSs in NSW.
The representational space differs from DET Regions. While DET appeared to separate Sydney from non-Sydney parts of the State, NSW Health extended its AHSs to incorporate some of these non-Sydney areas, with the Illawarra included in southeastern Sydney, the Blue Mountains and Lithgow included in western Sydney and the Central Coast included in northern Sydney. The result, visually, is almost weblike, with the four Sydney AHSs beginning near the centre of Sydney and sprawling in four directions beyond the suburbs into the various population centres and rural locales that surround Sydney’s greater metropolitan area.

In policing there are only six regions but within each region are Local Area Commands (LAC), with a total of 80 LACs in NSW. The following map shows the location of these regions and LACs.
Regions – Local Area Commands

Map 3: Regions and Local Area Commands, New South Wales Police Force

Again, this is a very different representational space compared to education. Why so many Local Area Commands? Why, therefore, so few in education and health? What is the relationship between space, policy and practice for each of these professional practice fields and what can we learn about the spatiality of professional practice from a better understanding of that relationship?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to discuss the spaces of education not just through the prism of DET Regions in NSW but also by using our own conception of rural-regionality as a device to buffet and push against the DET’s version of space, in the hope of highlighting how politics and power are rendered through and in space. The question of rural-regional sustainability as it relates to education is not straight-forward. In my study area, NSW, this is a question that requires researchers to engage with other representations that co-exist with rural-regional areas, such as DET’s Regions, but also perhaps to think about the many other ways that space is represented in our research inquiries (see Hugo, 2001). I have attempted to show that grasping rural-regional space in an educational policy context requires not just an understanding of DET’s spaces but also an opening up of our own representational spaces – a ‘trialectic’ between our representational spaces, DET’s representational spaces and the discursive role of representations of space as reflected in policy documents. The overriding theme of this paper has been recognising the political dimensions of space and representation, something to which Massey, Lefebvre and others would attest. By emphasising the representational nature of space, we can not only analyse how others are representing space but also how we represent space to ourselves and to others through our research.
References


