Revisioning the Social: Young Australians and the Rural/Urban Divide

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ABSTRACT The challenge for citizenship education in contemporary Australia where there have been recent radical changes in the composition of the population, raises questions about national identity, notions of shared history, language and place. In particular the older distinction between urban and rural dwellers that had shaped earlier Australians may have outlived its usefulness. This article reports on a study of young people’s understanding of themselves as Australian and their affiliation with the place in which they live. The authors contrast the responses of young rural Australians with those derived from their urban studies and draw out some of the different ‘Australias’ as described by the schoolchildren. Ultimately the paper argues for citizenship education to comprise a revisioning of Australia as a social and political entity in ways that incorporate and celebrate difference without diminishing allegiance to the country as whole.

Australia’s future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision. [1]

Introduction

Despite the well developed theoretical connection between the role of the school in the construction of national identity (Willinsky, 1999; Said, 1995), Australian education has only recently invested formally in the production of an informed and active citizenry, as identified in the Adelaide Declaration above. Such an orientation presupposes a conception of Australia as a social and political entity, along with some understanding of oneself as a part of this larger whole. Given the range of possible constructions about what the new Australia is and the efforts to describe and define national identity within the broader contexts of multiculturalism and globalisation, it seems the task is far from simple.

Not only must Australian education craft a sense of national identity that incorporates and encompasses the rich mix of immigrants from Europe, Britain and, more recently, Asia, it also has to deal with ideological legacies from the past. One of the most enduring of these is the oppositional positioning of the city and the bush in the Australian imaginary. In the early days of Australia, artists and writers had presented a very British version of Australia as a country whose major division was that between the city sophisticates and the rural outback workers with the latter being depicted in terms of the joys of life in the bush, an image which has persisted
down the years. Such work celebrated a male-ordered Australian humanist ideal characterised by a freedom of spirit, being one’s own boss, answerable only to oneself, being at one with nature (Kapferer, 1990). While some of these features continue in the celebration of the sporting hero, enduringly part of Australian popular culture, the city/bush distinction against which they were constructed appears increasingly irrelevant to the lived experience of contemporary Australians. While the vast majority of Australians have always tended to live in the cities and narrow coastal fringes, the country towns are currently in serious decline. Recent projections suggest that the population in country towns is fast diminishing such that only half of those towns currently in existence will be there in 10 years time. In this paper we take up the question of the connection between schooling and national identity in the light of recent socio-cultural change. Hence we are not addressing issues specific to civics and citizenship curriculum, rather we explore the prior concepts upon which such education must build if it is to be effective.

What do children know about Australia as a social and political entity?

For the past five years we have been conducting studies of the ways in which Australian school children understand themselves as Australians and, related, what they know about Australia’s social and political conventions and practices. Our initial motivation for this work was our disenchantment as educationalists with the curriculum package known as Discovering Democracy (Curriculum Corporation, 1997) which was sent to every school in Australia in November 1998. While recognising that this curriculum development constituted a courageous response by government advisers to do something about the alarming levels of ignorance of the workings of the Australian political system that had been shown to be widespread in the general community, we were concerned that it was not based on any evidence of children’s present state of knowledge. An American researcher makes a similar point:

Reports of various test results ... provide some data about what students do not know, but very little about what they do know and believe about the United States, the nation’s history and their own and the nation’s future. (Cornbleth, 2002:520)

As educators we are committed to the principles of constructivist approaches to learning and in particular to the idea that new knowledge is always and inevitably constructed on the basis of what is already known (Hendry, 1996). Hence, our attempt to find out what primary school children do know about institutionalised systems of power (Howard and Gill, 2000).

In the course of this research we were able to establish that children were indeed aware of systematised power, although they may not have the correct words to describe the processes of government. They may not always have been able to name key figures but they did understand the concept of law and the need for civic regulation. They also showed a ready understanding of the principles of democratic practice insofar as these were enacted in their school experience. In particular we were able to show the development of children’s political understanding from a fairly crude construction of power in the junior primary years to a much more sophisticated realisation of the operations of community, state and nation by the upper years of primary school. We likened this phenomenon to that of the ‘pebble in the pond’ with the pattern of ever widening concentric circles representing their
increasing knowledge domains (Howard and Gill, 2000). This research led us to regard schooling as important in young people’s understanding of political systems, along with developing knowledge about their own place, its history and customs, a position similar to that expressed here:

Schooling plays a key, but not exclusive, role in shaping student’s knowledge and beliefs about the nation. (Cornbleth, 2002:521)

How do children feel about being Australian?

Having established that children do have, albeit rudimentary and incomplete, understandings about the workings of Australian society upon which teachers can build effective civics and citizenship curriculum, we turned our attention to questions of national identity. Our interest was in the ways children might identify themselves as being Australian. We concur with the position proposed by Haste (1987), that an affective element of cognition is centrally involved in any effective civics or citizenship education programme.

The routine ways in which young people were traditionally drawn into an understanding of place and country – the formal lessons in the geography, history and literature of Australia – have largely disappeared from the curriculum, to be replaced by subjects loosely grouped under the heading Society and the Environment which assuredly address a new set of issues, possibly with some assumptions from the older curriculum offerings. As Grundy has written, the texts and practices contained in school lessons constitute the official storylines of a society (Grundy, 1994). Frequently such storylines are laden with implicit values, sometimes explicit – such as the tales of the ‘first settlers’, the ‘discovery of Australia’ and other phrases which effectively reconstitute the eighteenth century myth of terra nullius. Similarly, the stories and poems of nineteenth century writers like Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson enshrined the concepts of ‘mateship’, the nobility of bush battlers and the unique beauty of Australia’s rural landscape. Texts such as these are no longer favoured in many schools and the current generation of primary schoolchildren is likely to be unfamiliar with these traditional themes. Moreover, contemporary schooling practice is less likely to be intermeshed with exercises of patriotic alignment such as flag raising, anthem signing, ANZAC day observance (military history) as was the routine for previous generations.

In addition, the penetration of overseas media, most especially through television, would likely mean that today’s young Australians are equally familiar with downtown Springfield from The Simpsons or the New York cityscape from Sex in the City as they are with their own local towns and cities. There is no doubt that the burgeoning fields of children’s literature, media and social studies supply a wealth of offerings which constitute images and understanding of space and place, but the question remains: In what ways do the children construct an image of and a feeling for the country in which they live? What are the features of their Australia(s) and by what means are their images realised? With the renewed interest in citizenship as a project of education it seemed both timely and useful to find out how the current generation positions itself in relation to the country as a whole.

In the course of our research into these questions, we were able to show that young people do in general feel very positively about ‘being Australian’ (Gill and Howard, 2002). Their responses echoed the pattern established by American researchers who found that the young people in their study held to ‘an image of the
country’s continuous and beneficial progress’ (Barton et al, 1998:3). Moreover, strongly linked to their sense of being Australian were feelings of being ‘safe’, ‘proud’ and ‘free’ – we explore what this might mean elsewhere (Howard and Gill, 2005).

This present paper addresses the question of the degree to which the division between city and country (in terms of culture and place) still impacts on the ways in which contemporary young Australians identify themselves. Are the current imaginings of the ‘Australian way’ still forged in terms of the older stories of strong resourceful bush dwellers as compared to their more sophisticated city cousins? We focus on the children’s language when talking about Australia, the images used, the words and phrases repeated and the concrete detail provided. From this material we analyse the major themes that recur in children’s talk, themes that will constitute the current ‘songlines’ through which they understand the country and variously position themselves more or less as part of it.

Methodology, methods and processes

As with our earlier work (Howard and Gill, 2000, 2001, 2002; Gill and Howard, 1999, 2002) our study was conducted as a qualitative investigation through small group interviews with upper primary school children. We chose this approach as most likely to allow us insight into features of the young people’s attitudes that may not be revealed in other methods of investigation (Patton, 1990). Hence, we used a semi-structured interview schedule with groups of between four and five children in a range of schools in distinctly different regions in rural South Australia. In the most recent investigation we deliberately chose rural schools because our earlier studies had involved only urban children and we wished to discover if ‘being Australian’ carried different meanings for rural children as compared with those from the city. In this part of the study we interviewed some 250 young people spread across schools in South Australia’s famous wine making region, the Barossa Valley, the industrial steel works regions north of Adelaide known as the Lower and Mid-North, the Riverland and the farming districts of the South East.

The students were generally in their final year of primary school (year 7 in South Australia) and they were nearly all 12 years of age. The study has thus far included some 400 children – the original 150 from urban schools and the more recent 250 from rural locations. The rural children comprised 124 girls and 130 boys from 14 different schools. In terms of cultural mix there was a definite presence of indigenous children in the rural groups – one of the schools was 80% indigenous whereas the city schools had fewer indigenous students. In certain areas, such as the Riverland and the South East, the rural children were predominantly non-indigenous Australians whose families had farmed the area for generations. In other cases there were children from German backgrounds in the Barossa Valley and in the Lower North market gardening districts there were significant numbers of children with Vietnamese backgrounds.

Procedures

Considerations of language are very important in generating free-flowing discussions with young people. As interviewers we deliberately avoided using more abstract concepts such as ‘national identity’, ‘culture’, ‘nation’ and so on, preferring to speak in terms of concrete features of their daily living and to gently probe their
felt responses to these aspects. Only in the few cases when informants invoked more abstract terms did we pursue them in conversation.

The discussions began with some general icebreaking techniques designed to get the children talking easily. All discussion groups met at their regular school and as interviewers we took time to reassure the participants that the discussion was not part of the formal school requirements. Early on we made clear that there were no right answers to the sorts of questions we were looking at - and that all opinions were of value and interest to us. Then we moved to issues raised in the deliberate effort to get at the children’s felt responses to questions of place and nation. Among the questions we asked are:

What’s it like to live here? What do you like about it? And what’s not so good?

We sought ways of uncovering the images that conveyed meanings to our participants in questions such as:

If you were asked to make a collage which showed the way you felt about Australia, what would you put in it?

With this question we were using a familiar task – primary students are familiar with the idea of collage making – to move to the more abstract level of representation and felt response. We also used hypothetical questions such as:

If you had to go to live in another country, apart from family and friends what do you think you’d miss?

During the course of the discussions the researchers sought clarification of key terms or words that the children had used. Probes were often used to ascertain that the meaning was clear.

All discussions were subsequently transcribed and organised for analysis using the NUD*IST data management software. The analysis was conducted in terms of the words and phrases used, their meanings and affective connotations and the frequencies of occurrence in the partial and entire data set. No actual names of students or schools are reported in this paper. All names are pseudonyms, although the general region is identified.

Results and discussion

In the following paragraphs we identify themes that emerged during our discussions and give examples of the ways in which the children’s thinking about their place is framed by particular features of their home environments. Direct quotations are used as examples of the children’s speech, sometimes an individual representation and elsewhere as an excerpt of conversation in which the reader can observe the negotiation of meaning between the group members. Indications of the frequency of a particular feature are also identified in order to substantiate our claim for its thematic status.

The place to be

Compared with city children, country students exhibited a strong sense of place, for example they frequently alluded to the name of their particular town whereas the city children rarely named the neighbourhood, suburb or the city in which they all lived and went to school. While some rural children felt themselves to be possibly less significantly located when compared to city dwellers, they were sure their place was more desirable than a city location. They knew they were not-city whereas the urban children had never identified themselves as being not-country. This phenomenon is consistent with the sociological insight that the inferior location (in
this case rural populations are numerically inferior and also less likely to have concentrations of status and power) usually experiences itself as marked, whereas the superior other is the unmarked norm (Connell, 1983). Several of the rural children volunteered their fears of what they would have to go without if they were to move to the city:

Carey (Mid-North): We’ve got a very big property and if we had to move into a town or a city or something we probably wouldn’t be able to take all the animals because we’ve got tons.

Int: OK and Greg, what’s good about living here for you?

Greg: I would miss all the trees. I’d miss doing burnouts and that on the motor bike and because you can’t do them in the town without getting caught with the cops ... and I’d miss rounding up sheep, going shearing ... and them things.

Clearly the thought of life in the city was for these youngsters a fate they would gladly do without. In the above quotation they use the city as the negative reference point from which they go on to establish what is good about their own situation. Another rationale for living ‘in the country’ was developed in terms of the clean green environment with lots of space, as in the following comment from a boy from the Barossa Valley:

Jack: It’s good living here ‘cos it’s not cramped. And you don’t have to go down a street and there is a stink of car fumes and all that like it is in the city.

Being ‘in the country’ was intimately connected with the themes of safe and free – two key themes in the children’s emotional response to being Australian (Gill and Howard, 2002). Whereas many of the rural children, along with their city based counterparts, appeared to regard other countries as different and inherently dangerous, for these country dwellers the city itself became the dangerous other too.

Bob (Riverland): The thing I like about Rivertown is that when you go places you can just leave your door open and no one goes in your house, not like in Adelaide. And when you go to bed you don’t hear cars go past. And it’s nicer weather...

And Lara from the Riverland also suggested that the country is safer than the city:

There’s no wars and most of the people are happy most of the time. And there’s no real bad things happen. Like if you were living in the city it would be like murders and drugs and drinking and stuff. But here it’s not.

Their sense of freedom was often expressed in being able to do things they thought city kids could not, such as:

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Mary (Mid-North): If I moved to Adelaide, right, I wouldn’t get the chance to scream. Like in here it’s remote. We live near the town and not too far from the city. It’s the outback actually a very remote area.

Int: And what about you Steve? What's good about living here for you?

Steven: Like Mary said you can just scream. I live here and I’ve got a big paddock and then it’s my next door neighbour’s house. And I just scream over to her.

For many rural children, the sense of freedom was associated with space, not being on top of other people and having room to move. The term space appeared repeatedly (99 hits in 76 documents) in conversations with the children as they offered a rationale for the joys of country life. In the above examples space is associated with being able to raise your voice whereas the city in their construction is a place where you have to limit your bodily movements, your voice and your impact on the environment generally. Perhaps the ultimate expression of this sort of freedom was given by Dan from the Lower-North:

Dan: Oh, and if you live out in the farms and that or if you go out there like – you could actually, if it was a really hot day, you could walk around in your underpants.

The sense of feeling free in the safety of the country was echoed throughout the different locations. For instance from the South East:

David: There’s lots of open space and you can ride the motor bike around and there’s not many thieves, because when we went to West Beach [Adelaide beach suburb] someone stole my pair of thongs and I was upset.

Nick: I just like the freedom and you can do lots of things without worrying about stuff.

Int: Such as?

Nick: Such as like lots of like kidnappers and everything like that.

Working with young adolescents in the U.S., Cornbleth (2002) had found that the term free was frequently connected with the U.S. or America but was used as a symbol or a slogan by most students as in 'land of the free'. These young rural Australians tended to express their sense of freedom in terms of being able to do things because they lived in the country. Their freedom was expressed in personalised and localised ways as an enabling capacity for action in addition to being seen as a question of rights.

For others it was the sense of friendliness that was a source of pleasure in country life. In this feature the children echoed the idea of Australian 'mateship', a mythologized quality associated with life in the bush (Kapferer, 1990) frequently referred to with pride by the current conservative Prime Minister. Whereas none of...
the city children had spoken about the friendliness of their particular neighbourhood communities, it was a theme frequently invoked by the rural children:

Jim (Riverland): It’s a friendly place and you can walk down the street and you’d see someone and you’d be able to go ‘Hi’ and you’d know who they are.

Anna: Yeah, just knowing everybody in town and becoming friends with as many as you can ... that’s good.

Michael: Friends and you’re close to family because my Gran lives here too and apart from my Pop practically all my other family live close by.

Once again this theme provided a way of establishing themselves as not-the-city with the city being associated with strangeness, lack of friendly faces, danger. And from a group of Aboriginal children in the Mid-North for whom the city represented loneliness and dread:

David: All of Kaloomba, they basically know you and you get on with everyone goodly and then if you get taken away to the city it would be heaps different and there would be robberies and that and you wouldn’t know how to stop them.

Ali: Yeah you know everyone round the town, except for new people and it’s easy to get to know them and stuff ... if you move to a city you won’t know anyone.

But a hint of bitter personal experience too in:

Alan: The only bad part about living in a small town like this is news spreads really quickly. So if you do something wrong the whole town will know in an hour or so.

In many respects the children, in their estimation of the joys of country living and the miseries of the city, echo the sort of fundamental division that was constructed a hundred years ago by the first wave of writers and artists in crafting a vision of Australia. Certainly their ways of expressing the differences they believe to exist between life in the city and life in the country are less poetic and rather more influenced, one suspects, by local attitudes and the nightly news than anything they have heard or read. But their sentiments are remarkably similar to one another across their very different rural locations. Thus the idea of being not-the-city appears to be widely shared and celebrated in ways decidedly similar and to those earlier voices in the bush ballads of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Like the urban children had done in the earlier investigation, many of the rural participants affirmed a sense of delight in nature, in Australian flora and fauna, as part of their reason for enjoying life in the country. Boys and girls spoke easily about their emotional response to the place they understood as their part of the world without any sentimentality or jingoism.
Nick (Mid-North): Big space – we’ve got three very big farms and the possibilities of having hundreds of lizards is quite high – I love the lizards.

Charlie: Oh yeah, I love the mallee trees and making cubbies. I forgot to mention that ... and I love this place because it’s just perfect. It’s nice in summer but in the winter I hate it when it starts to rain real hard and it’s windy and really cold.

Int: Ok what’s good about living here then?

Charlie: Knowing that this is your home and nothing else can take it away.

In many cases these children affirmed a belief in the uniqueness of Australia and its flora and fauna, a belief which does not reflect reality (there are gum trees in other parts of the world!) but which undoubtedly contributes to the sense of the children’s pride in their country.

Int: So you want to put native animals on the collage?

Nancy (Barossa): They are an emblem

Chris: They belong to us and no one else.

Nancy: Like the kangaroo and the emu or the ostrich or something

Int: Anything else for the collage?

Bruce: Oh you’d put wombats

Diana: Koalas

Nancy: Dingo because that was already in Australia before.

Their responses here centre on a sense of the uniqueness of the country and their sense of themselves as its rightful owners – ‘they belong to us and no one else’. They name the animals they believe to be unique to Australia – with Nancy’s note that the dingo ‘was already in Australia before’. The interviewer did not pursue the meaning here but it would be most probable that she meant ‘before European settlement’ or ‘before the white people came here’. And so in talking about what is meant by being Australian the children reveal some understanding of the notion of pre-history, a pre-existing Australia before European settlement, an ancient land with unique and sometimes weird animals.

The place of education

The rural children were much more likely to offer favourable comments about their education than had the city children of our earlier interviews. Some country
children see a good education as one of the privileges associated with being Australian, for instance:

*Int:* Why would you put pictures of schools in your collage of Australia?

*Lily (Riverland):* ‘cause there’s a lot of people that don’t get education like us.

*Tom:* Put the words ‘good education’ because education is strong here and in some countries education is very poor.

And from the South East

*Lara:* [If living in another country, I would miss] ... the good education. I would miss Australian food too because it would be different food there.

Nor did the children limit their idea of education to the schooling alone:

*Billy (South East):* I was going to say that some countries can’t have cars and that because they haven’t got TAFEs [Institutes of Technical and Further Education] and that to make people become engineers and all that.

They evidently understand the purposes of a good education in functional terms, and the idea of good education emerges very clearly as one of their values.

*Joanna (Barossa):* And we’ve got schooling where some other places haven’t. We’ve got classrooms and they have to sit outside and do their lessons.

For educators it is heartening to note that the ideal of good education was widely shared by these rural children. In these discussions there was no talk about choice of school – you lived in a particular place and you went to the nearest public school. For most of them their experience of schooling was grounded in terms of the one institution they had attended all their schooldays. They readily admitted to a sense of privilege about having a good education and also they were almost universally positive about their schools.

**Symbols of place**

In their quest to identify symbols of Australia for the collage, the city children had almost all offered examples of Australian icons derived from features of the built environment associated with the eastern states and in particular with Sydney. Thus they nominated the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House as preferred images of Australia, reflecting perhaps the dominance of Sydney in terms of population and its more frequent appearance in representations of Australia with which they are familiar. (South Australian buildings or city features were rarely mentioned if at all, despite the fact that all the children were from SA.) The rural students, on the other
hand, were more likely to nominate natural icons – Uluru, Flinders Ranges, McDonnell Ranges, Murray River – many of which belong in their home state, others such as Uluru and the Olgas lying just across the border in the Northern Territory.

Jill (Lower North): Uluru and the Olgas

Michael: Because we are proud of them

Jill: Because people like to see them

Tim: Because we are proud that they are natural and they are not all man made like some countries are and we are proud of them

Van: Yeah ... like temples and stuff

A rejection of the built environment and awareness and positive valuing of the natural environment came through many of the rural children’s choices in terms of ways to represent Australia. For example:

Denise (Lower-North): And I’d put pictures of like all the different environments because that’s part of Australia, like deserts, and rain forests and mountain ranges.

Another notable difference between urban and rural respondents concerned the fact that the rural children were much more likely to nominate ANZAC day and Gallipoli as possible inclusions on their collage. In other words they appeared more aware of Australia’s military past than had the city children. In seeking to explain this difference we noted the presence in every country town of the war memorial as a built feature and the annual services that take place around this structure in which the townsfolk are routinely involved. For these children such rituals enabled a sense of history and served to ‘create a sense of collective identity’ (Barton et al, 1998:1) as Australian citizens, regardless of their own particular origins.

It’s my place

Virtually all the children expressed positive concepts of Australia and wanted to demonstrate this pictorially, but there were some interesting differences too. While all the children, both rural and urban, suggested the inclusion of happy smiling people – all sorts of people, young and old, black and white and so on - in their collage of Australia, the rural children were much more likely to nominate pictures of themselves as well in their list of worthy and desirable inclusions. In talking about this they affirmed a sense of self as Australian and therefore affirmed their right to be featured in any representation of the country. Just as the American children had used the pronoun ‘we’ and ‘ours’ when talking about the American revolution, regardless of their own particular ethnicity or gender (Barton et al, 1998:3), so too did these rural young Australians describe their country as ‘our place’.

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Conclusions

The storylines/songlines that were evident across the different locations of the children reflect some of the dominant ways of thinking about contemporary Australia. The differences between rural and urban children described above should not be seen to mask the very real and notable similarities between the groups. All the children expressed positive feelings about Australia and some of these broadly shared responses to the idea of being Australian are developed elsewhere (Gill and Howard, 2002). In this too they echoed the findings of the American study in which the young people said “From all over the world people come here. Straight to America. Better than any other country.” (Cornbleth, 2002:531). Like the American students, our young informants shared in an evident desire to claim their place as ‘best in the world’.

In the absence of the traditional songlines/storylines that once filled the curriculum in Australian primary schools, the rural children’s sense of their country remains highly congruent with the older traditional images, although the country no longer appears quite as abundant as it once used to be. Urban children constructed their storylines around global themes such as the evident multiculturalism in their lived experience, sporting achievements in an international arena and east coast icons of the built environment. On the other hand for rural children the iconography is more linked to natural symbols, sky, weather, geography, landscape and above all space. Space also had connotations over and above room to move. It signified freedom, lack of constraint at a spiritual and psychological level, as well as the physical level. The nature/culture binary is reflected in these responses. The urban children saw themselves as part of the current scene in their ready acceptance of other cultures and their capacity to identify with aspects of their culture and the man made environment. The rural children, on the other hand, construct themselves in terms of the natural environment in which they are positioned as free to be themselves, unfettered in movement and capacity for noise making, unrestricted by rules and regulations that they see as constraining the urban dweller – for example the capacity to do burn-outs on one’s motorbike in the back paddock.

Most interestingly perhaps was the way in which the rural children positioned themselves within the landscape in terms of their ready nomination of natural icons, their repeated avowals of their love of animals and trees and their insistence on presenting themselves pictured within the collage. They were key players within their understanding of what it meant to be Australian whereas the city children had more readily engaged with the idea of principles binding a society together, ideals of inclusiveness and multiculturalism. While many of the rural children also affirmed these principles, for them a sense of the land itself in terms of the physical environment was the more dominant theme.

In conclusion it would appear that the old storylines are being to some degree recycled in these rural children’s accounts of Australian ways. Like Patterson’s fictional hero in Clancy of the Overflow, they affirm a sense of space and freedom associated with life away from the city. A similar feature of the old storylines being recycled in current students’ interpretations was revealed by studies of Canadian students’ accounts of social change (den Heyer, 2002). Currently popular media have contributed to the celebration of the good life in locations removed from the city (viz: Sea Change and McLeod’s Daughters) suggesting that this mind-set is not limited to rural youth.

Similarly too Australian rural students have negative associations with the idea of the city in terms of its polluted environment, its crime, its crowdedness and they
describe a sense of danger permeating city life. They delight in the natural environment in which they experience themselves as properly located. The point here is not simply to suggest that the older storylines are being seamlessly recycled by rural youth. It could be that they are building a construction of the joys of country living from the truths of their daily experience and that the image of the crowded and polluted city serves simply to legitimate this position. However the frequency of their negative allusions to the city across the different rural locations would seem to indicate a shared need to represent the city as other in order to validate their claims.

Implications for civics and citizenship education

In terms of the educational project of developing understandings of citizenship and national identity there are some worrying trends that emerge from the data. Neither rural nor urban children appeared to have a sense of the country as a whole. First there is a sense in which the children’s negative views of the city and life in the city run counter to the current population movements which record a shrinking of country towns as country people move to the cities seeking work and livelihood. Given that most of these children will spend their adult lives as urban dwellers such negative associations are potentially dysfunctional.

Secondly their reiterated sense of their place as not-the-city appears to have emerged without the mediation of school learning but rather as a random amalgam of community attitudes augmented by media reports on the nightly news of crime, killings and mayhem. Without the attention to a sense of the country as a whole that used to be delivered through traditional social studies, these rural youth appear to have elevated the local in ways that are perhaps not congruent with the reality of life beyond their immediate neighbourhood. Their general concept appears as a non-school based cultural construction of ‘here’ which is essentially and fundamentally defined as ‘not there’ – not the other, dangerous, unknown city. Whereas the city children had tended to view themselves as incredibly better off than the people from other places whom they saw on television amidst war, famine and cultural and religious persecution, for these country children the city itself had become the frightening ‘other’.

For educators there are some concerns that this binary distinction between city and country, this regenerated ‘false dichotomy’ (Kapferer, 1990, p.87), may preclude young Australians from a more accurate appreciation of the range of lifestyles possible in contemporary Australia. After all, our cities may not warrant the negative associations offered by the rural children. Moreover it seems that the city children are largely unaware of the space and freedoms associated with life in the country. Education should avoid reinforcing simplistic perceptions and work instead to break down misconceptions and promote informed choice. Some schools have implemented programmes deliberately designed to overcome the sort of stereotyping we describe here. In some cases this has involved outlying and country schools operating a ‘city year’ for their students during the course of their schooling. In others, there is the option of spending time at a rural location for at least one half the school year so that students gain an awareness of life in the country grounded in sustained experience and not simply as tourists. And of course, in some wealthy schools, there are travel programmes for senior students who can learn from experiences of life in different societies to regard difference as neither threatening nor necessarily wrong.
Schooling has a responsibility to facilitate a revisioning of the social for young Australians in ways that contribute to social inclusion and avoid the traps of the urban/rural divide. The whole country stands to gain by education programmes that promote real understanding of the many different ways in which people choose to live in Australia. The ideal is not to eradicate regional differences but rather to celebrate them within a general understanding of the country as a whole, a ‘political imaginary’ (Hall, 1996) in which people can come together to make decisions for all Australians. And from this broad understanding comes the basis from which to educate for national and global citizenship.

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