Early Childhood

REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Literature review

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- What and where constitutes ‘rural’ or ‘regional’ and ‘remote’ is left definitionally ambiguous by the literature. This risks not only inconsistency, but also ‘deficit’ thinking about regional areas that emphasises the problematic aspects of rural life.

- By the first year of school, children living in regional and remote areas are more likely to be considered developmentally vulnerable than children in major cities. However, it is unclear to what degree remoteness is the causal factor of this disparity in outcomes compared to factors such as socio-economic status that are highly correlative with remoteness.

- Unexpectedly, available data indicates that children living in regional and remote areas are more likely to be enrolled in a preschool program. Additionally, enrolled children in regional and remote settings are more than twice as likely as their metropolitan peers to be enrolled in a dedicated preschool rather than a long day care centre.

- The additional challenges associated with recruiting, retaining and developing teachers are the primary focus of the research on quality in regional and remote early education. Furthermore, the hypothesis of market competition ‘driving up’ quality does not appear to apply to sparsely populated regional areas.

- Researchers identify integrated or coordinated service provision as the most effective and efficient approach to delivering preschool in regional and remote settings. Examples of both interagency coordination and integration with schools are evaluated positively in the literature.

- The delivery of early childhood education in Indigenous regional and remote communities must recognise the history of disempowerment experienced by these communities, and ensure that services are flexible, responsive and collaborative with local Aboriginal children and families.

- Place-based learning has been championed as an innovative and effective preschool pedagogical approach, especially in regional and remote areas.
INTRODUCTION

The importance of early childhood education is now well known. Research shows that children who participate in quality preschool programs are more likely to arrive at school equipped with the social, cognitive and emotional skills they need to engage in learning.

Furthermore, they continue to benefit from ‘downstream outcomes’ such as educational attainment, economic participation and family wellbeing (O’Connell et al. 2016). Importantly, the greatest benefits of early childhood education appear to accrue to children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Melhuish 2015). The potential gains of early education are, however, contingent on the quality of service provision (Tayler & Siraj 2014). In New South Wales, 28% of four- and five-year old children enrolled in a preschool program do so in a regional or remote setting. These children are more likely than their metropolitan peers to arrive at school lacking key developmental capabilities.

The Australian Early Development Census reported that in 2015, children in very remote areas were more than twice as likely to be considered developmentally vulnerable than children living in major cities.

This literature review surveys recent research on early childhood education in regional and remote communities. The focus here is on Australian research published in the last decade. However, where this research is lacking, this review also includes relevant international work and research at the school level when the findings are considered transferable.

This review is divided into six sections: defining ‘regional and remote’; outcomes in regional and remote areas; participation in a preschool program; factors affecting quality; service delivery models; and whether there is a distinct rural pedagogical approach.
DEFINING ‘RURAL AND REMOTE’

The literature on rural and remote early childhood education is not extensive, but has increased in recent years as public, academic and policy interest in early education has grown. Even as the area of research has developed, however, there remains a lack of clarity around what is – and where is – ‘rural and remote’.

In the majority of research papers surveyed for this review, the terms are not defined. In some cases, the rurality of a place is established by asserting its distance from another. For example, MacDonald (2008: 14) describes Callan Public School as being ‘approximately 30 minutes away from Wadden, the nearest town centre.’ Without a definition, these researchers implicitly rely on a taken-for-granted understanding of what constitutes ‘rural and remote. The absence of a definition creates problems with consistent categorisation of the rurality/remoteness of places.

Furthermore, the term ‘rural’ is more evocative than it is scientific. It does not describe precise geographical locations, but rather refers to socially constructed understandings of non-urban spaces (Halfacree 2006). The notion of ‘rural’ is constituted as a category distinct from ‘urban’ through a set of images, beliefs and stories that are attached to it. It is meaningful because of these discourses.

Reid et al. (2008: 3) argues that the public understanding of ‘rural’ in Australia is built largely on ‘the myth of the loneliness of rural living, of the slow-talking, slow-witted redneck, of snakes and dirt roads and dust’. The risk is that these discourses of ‘rural’ lead to a ‘deficit’ model of thought about education in non-urban locations, one that stresses only the difficulties and challenges associated with rural schooling (Reid et al. 2008; CESE 2013).

When ‘rural and remote’ is defined in the literature, researchers draw upon the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). ARIA+ delineates five areas: Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote. The question of which of these five areas should be considered ‘rural and remote’ is not directly addressed by the early education literature. Some researchers do however implicitly offer suggestions. Johns (2010) focused on outer regional areas in her qualitative study of intersectoral collaboration. The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2013), in their rural and remote education literature review, analysed the educational outcomes of all non-major cities areas.

WHEN ‘RURAL AND REMOTE’ IS DEFINED IN THE LITERATURE, RESEARCHERS DRAW UPON THE ACCESSIBILITY AND REMOTENESS INDEX OF AUSTRALIA (ARIA+) DEVELOPED BY THE AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (ABS).
DEFINING ‘RURAL AND REMOTE’ (CONT’D)

ARIA+ is used to calculate location loading in Resource Allocation Model (RAM), the school funding system used in New South Wales. Location loading in RAM consists of two components:

Remoteness component, calculated by weighting enrolments according to the school’s ARIA+ score. It delivers additional funding to schools in Outer Regional (each enrolment receives 1.0 of specified Remoteness loading amount), Remote (1.5) and Very Remote (2.0) areas.

Isolation component, made available to all schools outside Major Cities. Each school is given an Isolation index score, calculated in reference to the distance to nearby schools and the number of enrolments at those schools.

More definitional work should be a priority for researchers moving forward. For the purposes of this review, ‘rural and remote’ follows the definitional assumptions of researchers by necessity, and uses the four ARIA+ regional and remote areas when possible.
Discrepancies between student outcomes in regional and urban areas widen as students move through the levels of the education system (CESE 2013). Yet the ‘remoteness gap’ in outcomes is already pronounced by the time children start school.

Analysis of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2015 data reveals that in the first year of full-time schooling, 21 per cent of children living in major cities were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, compared to 47 per cent of children in very remote areas.¹

The extent to which remoteness is the factor driving these unequal educational outcomes, however, is disputed. A comparatively higher proportion of children living in remote areas belong to at-risk subpopulations, such as coming from an Indigenous background or low-income family (O’Connor et al. 2016).

Therefore, these children are likely to experience an accumulation of risk (Wong et al. 2014). It is a challenge to ‘pull apart’ remoteness from the combination of other risk factors affecting these children.

An Australian study on the impact of remoteness that accounts for these other risk factors has yet to be undertaken. The best available indication of the relative effect size of different factors comes from CESE’s analysis of regional-urban educational inequality in schools, which concluded that ‘the primary driver of the difference between metropolitan and regional students is the difference in socio-economic status’ (CESE 2013: 5).

A similar analysis at the preschool level of the factors that impact child outcomes in regional and remote areas is unlikely to occur soon. There is no standardised child-level assessment at the preschool level in Australia, and the closest analogue – the AEDC – occurs once every three years in the first year of primary school.

To compare the outcomes of early childhood education across different child sub-populations, academics and policymakers more often look to two factors assumed to be casually related to outcomes: participation in a preschool program and the quality of services.

21 PER CENT OF CHILDREN LIVING IN MAJOR CITIES WERE DEVELOPMENTALLY VULNERABLE ON ONE OR MORE DOMAINS, COMPARED TO 47 PER CENT OF CHILDREN IN VERY REMOTE AREAS.

¹ The AEDC provides data on children’s capabilities at the time they begin school. In the 2015 data collection, information was collected on over 300,000 children in Australia, or 96.7% of children in their first year of full-time school. The AEDC provides a broad cross-section of data, assessing children across five domains: physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication.
PARTICIPATION IN A PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

All children
There are additional challenges to participating in a preschool program in a regional or remote area. Both the quantity and quality of services may be limited and families may be required to travel substantial distances to access early education (O’Connor et al 2016). Despite this, available data indicates that children living outside major cities are more likely to participate in early education.

A research report published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2013 found that NSW is the only State or Territory in which a higher proportion of children were enrolled in regional areas than major cities (Baxter & Hand 2013). Analysis of the ABS Preschool Education Australia 2015 report shows that children were enrolled at a higher rate in both remote and regional areas than in major cities.²

Graph A: Children in regional and remote areas are more likely to be enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school ³

![Graph showing the percentage of children enrolled in the year before school by location type.

ANALYSIS OF THE ABS PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AUSTRALIA 2015 REPORT SHOWS THAT CHILDREN WERE ENROLLED AT A HIGHER RATE IN BOTH REMOTE AND REGIONAL AREAS THAN IN MAJOR CITIES.

² To calculate the proportion of children enrolled, the numerator was the number of children enrolled in their year before school and the denominator was the ABS’ estimated resident population of four-year-olds.

³ Australia Bureau of Statistics Preschool Education Australia 2015.
Indigenous children

Following broader trends, an analysis of two Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children (LSIC) waves found that the highest rates of Indigenous enrolment were seen in remote areas, followed by regional areas, followed by major cities (Hewitt & Walter 2014). Overall, however, Indigenous children are enrolled in preschool programs at lower rates than their non-Indigenous peers. It should be noted that issues surrounding Indigenous participation in early education cannot be detached from the ‘history of disempowerment and separation from land, family and culture experienced by indigenous Australians’ (Bowes and Grace 2014: 2).

The literature accounts for certain distinct factors that affect Indigenous participation in early childhood education, as well as factors that more commonly impact Indigenous families given that they are more likely to experience socio-economic disadvantage. Hewitt & Walter (2014), for instance, argue that much of the preschool participation gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children can be attributed to factors such as household income and housing (in) stability.

Grace & Trudgett (2012) identify three key barriers to Indigenous families engaging with preschool:

1. The complexities of community decisions regarding which preschools are appropriate to attend;
2. Practical difficulties of transporting children to school;
3. Families feeling shame at their own literacy level and/or not always being able to provide appropriate clothing, footwear and food for their children.

Dockett et al. (2010) argue that Indigenous children’s school readiness is influenced by the schools’ preparedness for the children, such as employing Indigenous staff members and positively engaging with the Indigenous community. Similarly, Biddle (2007) found that having a preschool staff member who identifies as Indigenous significantly increases attendance of Indigenous children in the area.

Graph B: Children living outside major cities are more likely to be enrolled in dedicated preschools rather than long day care centres

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<th>Major cities</th>
<th>Inner/Outer regional</th>
<th>Remote/Very remote</th>
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<td>Preschool</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long day care</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
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* Australia Bureau of Statistics Preschool Education Australia 2015.
FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY

Early childhood teachers
The most comprehensively explored topic in the recent literature on early childhood education in regional and remote settings is teacher quality. This literature on the early childhood workforce can be categorised into three overlapping focus areas: recruitment, retention and development.

The shortage of qualified early childhood teachers (ECTs) in regional and remote areas is widely acknowledged in the literature (Irvine & Farrell 2013; Baxter & Hand 2013). The reasons for these recruitment difficulties have been outlined by various researchers. First, there are the perceived lifestyle challenges of living in regional areas such as reduced services, diminished access to social events and the ‘constant scrutiny’ of small communities (Green & Nolan 2011; Hasley 2006). Second, teaching in regional areas also involves teaching children from low socio-economic backgrounds, who may bring additional issues to the classroom (McBride 2007). Third, there are concerns over staff wages, hours, professional status and expectations; common to most ECTs but magnified in regional settings (Irvine & Farrell 2013). While school teachers in regional and remote locations are eligible for rental subsidies of up to 90% and transfer points, as well as additional salary, personal leave and development days, ECTs accrue none of these benefits for working in under-staffed remote locations.

Boylan (2010) identifies a corollary issue: in addition to recruiting ECTs to work in regional settings, there is a need to attract the right people. She argues that to succeed as an ECT in a regional or remote community, teachers need to develop a particular set of skills and qualities, including sophisticated strategies for community engagement and an appreciation of the climactic, historical, cultural and geographic peculiarities of living in regional communities. For example, the cultural importance and collective experience of Sorry Business in Aboriginal communities or the impact of drought on farming communities may not be apparent to someone from outside the community.

Governments, including the West Australian Government, have developed initiatives that aim to give teaching students exposure to regional and remote areas (Lock 2008; King 2006; Hudson & Millwater 2009). This may assist in developing interest in, and knowledge of, regional teaching settings. A separate approach is recommended by Kline et al. (2013), who argue that incentive schemes such as scholarships for regional and remote ECTs are under-utilised and under-promoted.

Retention of ECTs, and more broadly of school teachers, is the second focus of the literature on teacher quality. Lyons (2006) found that teachers who were initially from regional and remote areas are much more likely to remain teaching in regional communities for longer periods of time. What emerges from the literature, however, is that issues associated with teacher retention are strongly intertwined with problems surrounding professional development. Mentoring, induction...
FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY (CONT’D)

programs, teacher networks and collaboration avenues lead to significantly higher retention rates for regional teachers (Groton 2009). Yet opportunities to participate in such activities are not distributed equally between ECTs in regional and urban locations. Professional learning and networking is often restricted for regional ECTs by a paucity of offerings in the local area, the cost of travelling to a session and the lack of qualified substitute staff (Whittington et al. 2014; Green & Nolan 2011).

In response to these additional challenges, the remote Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) professional development program was developed in remote areas of Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. This program is tailored to ECTs in regional settings and comprises learning resources, on-site mentoring and practical scenarios for teachers to engage with in the classroom (Elliott 2013).

Market competition

New South Wales has a mixed market early childhood education sector. Government funding is primarily directed to supporting not-for-profit community preschools and operating Department of Education-run preschools, with a proportion of funding also going to for-profit long day care centres. One presumed benefit of this mixed market system is that competition between services ‘drives up’ the quality of the education and care they provide to families (Naumann 2011).

There are reasons to doubt this presumption in any setting. A Grattan Institute report (Jensen 2013) revealed that it is difficult to achieve competition in education markets, and to date, government interventions to increase competition have generally been unsuccessful. Although this report focused on the schooling market, the causal factors underlying limited competition and constraining consumer choice are applicable to early childhood education.
These include a lack of high-performing alternatives, limited capacity for new enrolments, affordability issues and geographic distance. Competition in early education markets is further hamstrung by families’ limited information regarding available ECE options, a lack of awareness of the real benefits of ECE participation and the return on investment, and the difficulty in understanding what quality ‘looks like’ in early education services (Ball and Vincent 2006).

The market competition hypothesis is especially unlikely to be realised in regional and remote areas. In non-metropolitan settings, there is a preponderance of ‘thin markets’, in which sparse populations do not generate sufficient demand pressure to spark the necessary level of supply that would prompt the market to function on competitive grounds (Moss 2009).

**Integrating technology**

Thorpe et al. (2015) recently outlined the digital advances occurring in preschool classrooms in Australia. New tools can provide children with different approaches to learning, and stimulate interest in content. However, as the researchers argue, there are additional problems with introducing new digital tools into regional preschool classrooms such as limited internet access and bandwidth availability. However, there is a willingness and desire to engage with new technologies and interactive educational technology is becoming more common. For example the School A to Z and Learning Potential apps provide innovative ways parents and students to interact with education.

**THERE IS A WILLINGNESS AND DESIRE TO ENGAGE WITH NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND INTERACTIVE EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IS BECOMING MORE COMMON.**
Due to sparse and fluctuating populations, service sustainability in regional and remote areas is a persistent issue.

Most commonly in the literature, integrated or coordinated services are identified as the most effective and efficient approach to service provision in regional and remote settings. Integrating preschools with family care and health services has been a key pillar of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) early education agenda (Dockett & Perry 2014). The rationale for service integration begins with the recognition that fragmented services are constrained in their responsiveness to the diverse needs of families, especially in remote areas (Valentine et al. 2007). Cross-agency integration means families are not forced to navigate as many service boundaries, children experience greater continuity and agencies can engage in coordinated planning for children (Pelletier 2012).

One model of integrated service delivery is described by Moss et al. (2015) in their evaluation of the Preschool Readiness Program (PRP). Established in Alice Springs in 2009 and administered by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, PRP uses a mix of strategies to improve health and educational outcomes for children. The Congress has contact with most Aboriginal families in town as a large health provider, and during health visits, staff encourage families to enrol their children in preschool and seek to address any barriers to preschool participation they might experience.

The program did not set up new preschool centres, but endorsed certain existing local services and works with children to support their learning at these services. The program has received positive feedback from parents and teachers.

Moss et al. (2015) conclude that close collaboration between preschool staff and PRP staff has allowed them to respond to individual children’s needs effectively. The level of collaboration between stakeholders is also identified by Johns (2010) in her qualitative study of three small regional communities in Tasmania where intersectoral cooperation between government and non-government agencies had been established. She argues that three interdependent variables influenced the success of these collaborations:

1. The social capital and prior relationships of stakeholders;
2. Leadership from the community in support of the collaboration;
3. Structural factors such as policy settings and available funding.
Wong, Sumsion and Press (2012) contend that three principles characterise effective integrated service provision:

1. A clear sense of purpose with different agencies sharing the same objectives;

2. Congruent and compatible practices across different professional approaches;

3. Minimal referral processes for families needing to access more than one type of service.

In their review of literature on early interventions for Indigenous children, Bowes and Grace (2014) found that successful programs in Indigenous communities were often characterised by service integration and collaboration. Importantly, these programs also were marked by flexibility to suit family and community contexts, significant engagement of Indigenous people through building relationships of reciprocity and trust, and employing staff who are Indigenous or have high levels of cultural competence.

Another approach to integrated preschool delivery can be seen in the Integrating Preschool with the First Years of School (IPWS) trial, evaluated by Dockett and Perry (2014). Run in 2012 in eight sites across regional and remote South Australia, IPWS was introduced as a way of offering fluctuating populations of preschool-age children a viable preschool program. With the support of local school principals, preschool programs were offered and operated by the school. Integration between the school and the preschool spanned multiple domains, from weaving together curriculum and pedagogical approaches to co-planning organisational arrangements. Dockett and Perry argue that the key challenges associated with this integration are a lack of willingness to collaborate, concerns from preschool parents about their child’s program becoming too academic, and a lack of teacher familiarity with different curriculums/pedagogies. Overall, however, they conclude that integrating preschool with the first years of school can promote access to early education in small communities.

Other models of preschool provision in regional and remote communities, such as mobile preschools or preschool through distance education, have not been evaluated in reliable ways by researchers in Australia.
A DISTINCT PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH?

An emphasis on ‘place-based’ learning has emerged recently in the literature. This pedagogical approach is described by the Alliance for Excellent Education as ‘hands-on learning opportunities that are rooted in local history, culture, art and environment’ (cited in CESE 2013: 15).

For example, the Connected Communities initiative aims to improve student outcomes in the schools involved through a range of mechanisms, including teaching of the local Aboriginal language and culture. This approach is premised on the notion that by connecting educational experiences to a familiar place, children will feel more engaged as the subject matter is linked to their lives and surroundings (Lyons 2006). Given the heightened importance of place in rural life, pedagogical approaches involving outdoors learning and content focusing on the local environment are seen as particularly valuable in regional and remote preschool programs (Elliott 2014).

In regional early childhood education services, place-based learning has often taken the form of ‘forest preschool’. International studies, especially from England, have touted the benefits of this type of preschool delivery, including increased confidence and motivation for children, the development of physical skills and growth in respect for the natural environment (O’Brien 2009; Borradaile 2006).

In Australia, Elliott (2014) has analysed Westgarth Kindergarten’s ‘Bush Kinder Pilot Program’, where children participate in play-based activities in Darebin Parklands for 3 hours per week. She reports that the program ‘exceeded the expectations of all involved’: children’s learning outcomes and enjoyment of preschool grew, the feedback of parents was overwhelmingly positive and teachers were encouraged by the progress they saw.

Two refutations of place-based learning stand out. First, as McConaghy et al. (2006) argue, an emphasis on place-based learning has the potential to de-prioritise the agenda of high expectations for all. Secondly, the claims that some advocates make about place-based learning are not exclusive to one pedagogy or another. Williams-Siegfredsen (2012: 9-10, cited in Elliott 2014) outlines the principles of forest preschool as being ‘holistic’, treating each child as ‘unique and competent’ and stressing ‘social interactions’. Certainly, these principles are not mutually exclusive with an approach to preschool education that does not prioritise place. Despite these criticisms, research suggests place-based learning does increase children’s enjoyment, teaches them about the environment and encourages them to be active.

IN REGIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES, PLACE-BASED LEARNING HAS OFTEN TAKEN THE FORM OF ‘FOREST PRESCHOOL’.
From this review of the literature, certain themes and lessons emerge that may guide the development of a regional and remote early education strategy.

These include:

- There is an exigent need to clearly define what and where is ‘regional and remote’ for the purposes of early childhood education policy and funding.

- Improving the regional and remote early education evidence base should be considered a priority. In particular, evaluations of mobile preschool programs and distance preschool programs are required to assess the effectiveness of these service provision approaches. Additionally, research with families living in regional and remote areas about their early education preferences, needs and experiences may be illuminating.

- The Department should consider a full range of policy options to address the shortage and quality level of ECTs in regional and remote areas. It may be worthwhile to explore incentive measures similar to those used in schools, and to develop distinctive professional development programs and resources for regional and remote settings.

- Given the issues with sustainability and competition that are associated with the market provision of early childhood education in regional and remote areas, there is a need to consider whether a higher level of government intervention is more appropriate in non-metropolitan settings.

- When it comes to service delivery, emphasis should be placed on integrated and coordinated services. Services in regional communities, especially areas of high social need, must be responsive to local needs, ensure continuity for children and families, and involve coordinated and collaborative planning between agencies and communities.

- Early childhood education interventions and service provision for Indigenous families must be approached with the recognition that Indigenous communities in Australia face additional and unique barriers in early education. Preschool programs for Indigenous children need to be characterised by genuine engagement and co-design with Indigenous communities, and the employment of Indigenous – or highly culturally competent non-Indigenous – staff.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY EDUCATION STRATEGY?
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