This paper explores some of the political and methodological challenges involved in researching rural education. It begins by outlining the situation in Australia regarding the relationship between social justice and rural education. It first describes the disadvantages experienced by many rural communities and presents an analysis of rural educational achievement in Australia. The paper then argues the limitations of traditional and established notions of social justice and, in this context, pr ...
Researching Rural Place(s): On Social Justice and Rural Education

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Abstract: This paper explores some of the political and methodological challenges involved in researching rural education. It begins by outlining the situation in Australia regarding the relationship between social justice and rural education. It firstly describes the disadvantages experienced by many rural communities and presents an analysis of rural educational achievement in Australia. The paper then argues the limitations of traditional and established notions of social justice, and in this context presents Soja’s (2010) proposal that spatiality is a third way of understanding the world. The paper is organised and informed by the principle that what matters, first and foremost, is the nature of the research problem, with decisions about methodology following, and shaped accordingly.

Introduction
Since the advent of schooling in Australia, rural areas have generally achieved educational outcomes below their metropolitan counterparts. What is more important than their comparative outcomes is that rural and urban schools have been simultaneously compared and considered as if they were essentially the same throughout the educational history of the nation. It is this dualism, of being different yet the same, that reveals how space and place are ill-considered notions in Australian educational policy, and how a subsequent “geographical blindness” (Green & Letts, 2007) has resulted in social justice approaches that are unable to consider the particularities of (rural) places. Instead, social justice in relation to rural schools has tended towards distributive approaches founded upon, and aimed at overcoming, economic differences between many rural and urban populations. In this way, such approaches have essentialised rural educational disadvantage by grouping all the rural as one category, while determining the needs of the rural in relation to the cosmopolitan values of urban élites. In addition, the dominant distributive approaches have reinforced notions of equity in terms of economic capital distributed on a national scale. In response to these dominant discourses, this paper seeks to build upon Green and Letts’ (2007) experiment in problematizing space in relation to equity and rural education by exploring the use of space and place in thinking about social justice.

Here, however, the focus is less on substantive matters associated with social justice and rural education, and more particularly on methodological challenges and issues. We are especially concerned with exploring space as an axis of social justice, and with place as a key reference-point for researching rural education. In doing so, we respond to Cuervo’s (2012) call to enlarge the social justice agenda in rural education, doing so in particular by drawing on Soja’s (2010) notion of spatial justice, and dwelling upon the particularities and subjectivities of rural places. This certainly means acknowledging the methodical and philosophical complexities involved in designing and conducting such
research, and being mindful of the value for what might be called a strategic eclecticism in research and methodology. Such a perspective brings together, as needed, qualitative and quantitative work, while maintaining a resolute focus on what is being researched, and why. In this case, the object of concern is two-fold: on the one hand, it is addressed to an expanded and more inclusive understanding of social justice, and on the other, it involves due acknowledgement of the difficulty of conceptualizing the rural, and hence of understanding rurality. For our purposes here, we accept the following as a working principle, definitionally: “It is important to define rural not only demographically and geographically but culturally as well” (Donehower, Hogg & Schell, 2012: 9). That is, put more positively, rurality is to be seen as a concept that is at once geographic, demographic and cultural, and hence as cutting across disciplinary and (meta-)methodological lines and boundaries. We begin nonetheless with a contextual account of social justice and rural education.

Rethinking Rurality and Social Justice
In enlarging the social justice agenda for rural education, Cuervo (2012) suggests the inclusion of associational and recognitional forms of justice, and as such begins to move the social justice agenda away from the dominance of economic capital to include more plural forms of capital. This is an important step in broadening our understanding of space, place and social justice, as more than impersonal categories of description, to also acknowledge the personal and subjective nature of such concerns. In this way it is important to remember that rural places, and indeed all places, are inhabited by people and are not just spaces mapped for descriptive convenience. As Gieryn (2000, p. 465) suggests, “place is space filled up by people, practices, objects and representations”, and hence employing the language of place helps shift the focus of social justice considerations towards subjectivities and particularities. However subjectivities are not neutral and often carry meaning that is socially ascribed and inscribed, leaving places both real and imagined (Soja, 1996). This is particularly the case in relation to rural Australia where the ‘outback’ or ‘bush’ myth is seen as an integral part of the national story, while paradoxically the contribution of the rural sector to the nation’s economy and rural populations has been declining since the ‘birth’ of the nation one hundred years ago (Brett, 2011). The Bush Myth has similarly epitomized the national character by being synonymous with the characteristics of ‘mateship’, hard work, resilience and ingenuity in the face of harsh geographies and precarious economic conditions. Distance and geography are entwined in the socio-historical construction of the rural, just as degrees of disadvantage are connected in the popular imagination with distance and the fertility or otherwise of the land. Accordingly, wealthy fertile areas bring forth an image of the rural idyll while marginal semi-arid land suggests isolation, desolation, and even fear.

As a result of this national imaginary, the rural has been socially constructed as backward, both of the past and valuing old ways, difficult, and in need of ‘rescuing’. Indeed it has been this way from the outset, with one justification for the initial provision of education in rural areas being to ensure the development of an appropriate moral standard in these newly settled regions. This state paternalism towards the character of the rural suggests that social capital is similarly spatially blind, as once more the particularities of place have been erased by a general comparison between the ‘normal’
urban and the ‘deviant’ rural. More problematic however is that such comparisons, whether economic or social, have been developed within a concern for equity and articulated in terms of social justice considerations about the quality of education received by rural students. According to Green and Letts (2007), this concern for equity resulted in centralized educational bureaucracies aimed at controlling the vast spaces beyond the capital cities through the rhetoric of providing a ‘quality’ education for those living there. In this view, space has been something to control and overcome, and perhaps even a contributing factor to the comparative ‘disadvantage’ experienced by these areas, and hence in effect rural places have existed in policy as quasi-urban social constructions. Such inherently metro-centric and cosmopolitan views of equity and quality have resulted in deficit views of rural educational achievement, along with simple redistributive equity approaches that take no account of the particularities and affordances of rural social space.

The historical positioning of the rural on the fringes of civilized society is the backdrop of ongoing general educational underachievement (when compared to the non-rural) and the perennial difficulty of attracting and retaining staff. On average: one in seven students from remote areas falls below minimum national standards for literacy, compared with one in twenty for urban areas; in international data, rural students are one and a half years behind city students (Thomson, 2011); in New South Wales, the state with the largest rural student population, an average of 46.9% students in very remote areas fell behind the national minimum for literacy and 40% below on numeracy (Picolli, 2011). These recent statistics are part of a long-held pattern of rural school achievement, and while not dismissed, are routinely explained as an understandable consequence of the average lower Socio-Economic Status (SES) of these communities (Welch, Helme & Lamb, 2007; HREOC, 2000). Compounding, and interrelated with, the achievement of rural students is the perennial challenge of staffing many rural schools (Reid et al 2010), itself linked to social and geographic isolation, social differences, school resourcing, and the student mix (Roberts 2004; Reid et al, 2010). The analysis that typically follows such a construction of disadvantage, as presented above, concludes that rural schools need various redistributive programs to provide extra resources to overcome the subsequent educational disadvantage or compensate staff in order to make rural schools more urban-like.

Such a conclusion is understandable as, existing notions of social justice do not disrupt the long-standing educational disadvantage experienced by many rural communities, nor do they advance ways of thinking about rural educational disadvantage differently. This, we suggest, is because existing practices, dominated by distributive approaches even though influenced to some extent by recognitional and associational approaches, do not take into account the spatial or geographic dimension of justice. Furthermore, such approaches are often founded on a view of equity that does not take into account the particularity of rural places or rural meanings, and instead conceives of rural schools and communities as having broadly the same needs as metropolitan schools. The result is that while rural students, particularly in remote areas and communities, are often identified as an underperforming group, their achievement is accounted for as a factor of the average lower SES of rural areas compounded by distance and inaccessibility, both also understood from a metropolitan perspective. Subsequently, while rural educational
achievement is recognised as a matter to be improved, the rural is not afforded recognition as an equity group or category in and of itself, and therefore is unable to represent itself.

As Cuervo (2012) notes, distributive justice has maintained a prominent position in social justice considerations in rural education policy and research. This is borne out by typical approaches, such as the Country Areas Program (CAP) and other equity schemes, that re-allocate resources to rural schools to compensate for the lower SES of the school community or their distance from a major metropolitan centre. The aim of these approaches is to ensure that rural school achievement matches that of non-rural schools either by providing extra resources to ‘enrich’ learning or by facilitating cultural activities that may not otherwise be possible. As such, they typically represent the ideas of justice advocated by Rawls (1972), in seeking to facilitate equality for the least advantaged whilst also valuing individual liberty, with resources reallocated to the least advantaged, and the appropriate use of the opportunity provided being a matter of the individual agency of the student. By providing resources, the state sees itself as meeting its obligations to look after the less well-off and as therefore not responsible for any outcomes that may result.

Geography is indeed positioned as an influence in this understanding of rural educational disadvantage, as, generally speaking, lower SES in rural areas is also associated with distance from large metropolitan centres (Welch, Helme & Lamb, 2007; HREOC, 2000). The relationship between geography and SES is unclear, however, if not rather ambivalent. What typically happens in policy and practice is that geography (ie space/place) is factored out and effectively denied first-order significance. What this indicates is that geography, specifically space and place, while acknowledged as producing certain effects in terms of educational outcomes, is not considered as a significant matter in relation to equity and social justice in its own right. Moreover, the disadvantage associated with rural locations is only associated with SES when the measures of achievement and economic success used in SES are based on metropolitan and/or cosmopolitan values, such as particular forms of cultural knowledge and experience. Recognising that space (and place) creates different conditions of knowing and ways of being indicates the inherent negative bias of current measurement technologies. Furthermore, these biases are directed towards one form of schooling and the social and economic capitals it values, many of which may be at odds with the valued capital of some rural communities.

As Teese and Polesel (2003) describe, class privilege and exclusion shape school dynamics, so much so that reforms are constrained by privileged groups who seek to make schools serve their interests. In this paper we argue that these privileged social groups are inherently metropolitan in their orientation, and value a ‘cosmopolitan’ form of education (Popkewitz, 2008). This form of education is ambivalent with regard to place(s), instead referencing a global outlook and economic advancement, and valuing mobility in a globalised world. Such a view of education reinforces the social marginalization of rural schooling and the notion of the rural as both ‘real’ and the imagined other, which we touch on later. Mixing with traditional views of class and social advantage, the idea of valuing a cosmopolitan form of education includes rural élites who often pursue education offered at prestigious metropolitan schools and
universities, rather than in their local communities. As Green et al. (2008) demonstrate, the rural is a complex economic mix and cannot be simply designated as a general SES, as characteristically pockets of extreme wealth exist in the country side by side with pockets of extreme poverty. Hence, in some respects the connection between rural schools and low SES is justified in terms of the likelihood, as realized, that many rural schools operate on a lower resource base due to a limited ability to raise extra funds, and consequently with limited extra-curricula activities and limited resources in the home. Of course, the other side of the school relationship, namely the curriculum and its connection with culture, is not considered.

The criticism of such approaches, advocated variously by Fraser (1995) and Young (1990), is that the interests of the disadvantaged are decided for them, and their needs determined by others. Indeed they are initially positioned as disadvantaged due to their lack of power in accordance with criteria determined by others and applied to them. As Young (1990) argues, however, the distributive paradigm is no longer enough to describe the complexities of injustice, as it tends to ignore the context that creates the injustice by focusing solely on consumption rather than mode of production: that is, it provides resources but doesn’t consider the nature or appropriateness of those resources. By doing this, Young (1990) argues it cannot account for the injustices that happen in the process of social exchange and cultural formation. Supporting this, Fraser (1995) has pointed out that “the 'struggle for recognition’ is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict” (Fraser, 1995, p.68), further arguing that demands for ‘recognition of difference’ and group identity have taken over from class conflict as the means of political protest (Fraser, 1995). Culture, Fraser (1995) argues, has supplanted economics as the struggle for recognition is replacing economic redistribution as a solution to injustice. Material inequity has not disappeared as a form or consequence of injustice but is instead entwined (Rizvi & Lingard, 1996), and often produced, with this lack of recognition.

To counter universalizing notions of justice and a lack of recognition, Fraser (2008) and Young (1990) variously propose supplementary recognitive and representational (or ‘associational’) forms of justice that recognize the culture and political dimensions of marginalization. Here recognitive justice seeks to take into account students’ cultures and their communities, in order to counter the previous lack of recognition and associated forms of cultural domination, while representational justice involves groups in decisions that affect them countering their previous lack of political power. Ironically, however, to disrupt educational disadvantage through either recognition and representation first requires identification and recognition as a disadvantaged group, something which the rural has not effectively achieved, as opposed to categories such as Indigenous groups, Non-English Speaking Back ground communities, women, or low SES communities. Abstracting groups to broader categories of disadvantage, place and space are not yet considered as a recognised category of disadvantage alongside the established groups of nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality (Fraser, 1995). However, the recognition that injustice can be understood in terms of representation, interpretation and communication, resulting in cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect (Fraser, 1995), is clearly important in how images of rural Australia are constructed, and partly explains how rural disadvantage remains largely unrecognized. In countering this, an
understanding of how the rural is distinct, and how ideas of place and space can help understand the construction of rural disadvantage, is necessary, especially in terms of demonstrating how the rural is not recognized and culturally dominated by urban cosmopolitan ideals.

Relatively low educational outcomes in rural areas are limited by a complex interaction of social and structural factors (HREOC, 2000) and interact with other causes of social and educational disadvantage in a manner not fully understood (NSWDET, 2011). Instead, lower achievement is accounted for by simple reference to the average lower SES of rural residents and distance, without any substantial exploration or description of how and why these manifest in educational achievement. How these social and structural actors come together is a matter of place and an implicit recognition that each rural place is distinct. As Thomson (2000) describes, each school has a particular combination of the range of contextual factors that gives a school its particular feel and approach, which she calls “‘thisness’”. The ‘thisness’ of particular schools means that factors may come together to cause educational disadvantage in distinct ways, while also providing for opportunities for approaches to overcoming this disadvantage. However, to take such opportunities requires teachers, school leaders and policy that are open to the particularity of places and able to respond to it. ‘Thisness’, and indeed place, works in direct contradiction to those approaches to educational equity that regard all schools as having the same needs and as aiming for the same outcomes. Indeed such approaches perhaps tend more towards a view of what might be called ‘thatness’ in relation to place, in that they erase the particularities of places and assume the needs of such schools as given. It may also suggest why equity interventions have not been able to solve the intransigence of educational disadvantage generally, and in the context of the rural in particular.

**On Spatial Justice**

To develop an understanding of the spatial dimension of justice, Soja (2010) advances the concept of ‘spatial justice’, proposing spatiality as another way of understanding the world in a ‘trialectic’ with traditionally dominant historical and social perspectives. Here, distributive, recognitive and representational justice are regarded as addressing either historical or socially constructed inequities, and as such are limited in their ability to both recognize and interrupt disadvantage. Instead, existing approaches are in need of supplementation, specifically with appropriate forms of spatial understanding. The value of such an approach is especially apparent when the rural is considered, we argue, as it is systematically and historically constructed in Australia as ‘out there’, on the fringe of settlement, categorized by economic measures, and compared to non-rural power centers. Educationally, this means that rural students are (a) constructed as deficient (in comparison with non-rural students), (b) assumed to need, somehow, to become less-rural, or something ‘other’ than they are, and (c) encouraged to master, and have their achievement measured in, a curriculum that values and prioritises metro-cosmopolitan ways of being, while remaining ambivalent to rurality. Hence, existing approaches to social justice in rural education, rooted as they are in traditionally dominant historical and social perspectives, are in need of supplementation with richly informed socio-spatial perspectives. That is, such an approach requires a reconceptualised understanding of social justice, rethinking what redistribution might be, while building upon recognitive
and representational approaches in drawing attention to the process of schooling and, in particular, the places or locations within which that process occurs.

In thematising space, equity and rural education, Green and Letts (2007) highlighted how space matters in education yet has been overlooked and generally regarded as unproblematic in Australian education policy and research. Instead of using space as a theoretical tool to understand education, the rural has instead been marginalized in educational research, with the city being seen as the norm of progressive education and modern(ist)reform. This marginalisation has resulted in a form of ‘geographical blindness’ on the part of Australian education (Green & Letts, 2007) and, we argue, this has limited our ability to critique the influences of globalization and neoliberalism on education. These placeless ideologies actively deny space as a constituent factor in educational (dis)advantage, while also being limited to primarily distributive mechanisms. For example, the Australian National Goals for Schooling, the rationale for all school-related policies and programs, posits the main aim of Australian education as ‘Equity and Excellence’ (MCEETYA, 2008). Here, equity is positioned as a form of sameness, albeit an urban construction, where everyone is to achieve at the highest level of excellence. The metropolitan gaze is valorized an expression of equitable aspiration, to combat the ‘postcode lottery’ of variable service provision and access. Forms of difference and place are not considered relevant factors, with excellence achieved through constant monitoring and evaluation against (again, urban-constructed) benchmarks for achievement. In the interests of equity, programs exist to redistribute limited funds for the recognized disadvantaged groups of Indigenous and low SES communities, though once again they are to achieve against standards they have had no input into, through systems they have again not influenced.

Importantly, these social and historical views have acted as the frame through which we look at traditional approaches, and while we might refer to redistribution, recognition, association and (to a limited extent) curricular (Connell, 1993) concerns, they have invariably positioned the object as static or fixed. Achievement has been against standards set, within an accepted curriculum. Existing approaches have not so much reconstituted the problem as looked at changing the practices associated with it through changing policy to give access. Pragmatically this may be necessary; however it needs to be recognized as precisely that, ie a pragmatic approach, while still challenging the constitution of the problem. A spatial understanding can assist here as it not only brings a new frame to these practice-based approaches to justice, but also a new way of understanding that may indeed help to reconstitute the problem.

The retreat of the last decade from complex notions of social justice and the general acceptance of universalizing neoliberal discourses provide an opportunity to rearticulate the importance of the rural in educational research, as it is a productive site for understanding the impact of globalization and neoliberal economic policies. In a social environment where standardization is a marker of quality, the rural stands alone as something recognizably different from cosmopolitan society, due to its ‘location’ and distinct cultures. We may even go as far to suggest that, in such research, ‘rural’ acts as a metaphor for ‘local’ and ‘urban’ a metaphor for ‘global’. This recognizable difference enables researchers to clearly observe the incursions of global economic and social ideologies as they transform rural understandings and
lifestyles. To utilize this opportunity to uncover the workings of the dominant placeless discourses, we need research that explicitly values rural meanings (Howley, Theobald & Howley, 2005). Such a singular focus is necessary, as we arguably cannot come to know the rural through traditional research methods, within which the particularities of places are abstracted through focusing upon methodological integrity, rather than on the problem being investigated. We turn now more squarely to the questions of (meta-)methodology.

Methodological Challenges and Opportunities
Moving away from methodological prescription, we argue that rural educational research needs to learn from Bourdieu (1992) and focus on specific rural issues rather than the method of study. Such an approach draws on Bourdieu’s methodological polytheism (Wacquant, 1998) by putting the issue to be investigated – in this case, rural educational aspiration, experience and achievement – at the centre and drawing upon the variety of data and techniques available. In so doing, this approach is congruent with Nespor’s (2006) argument that the controversies of method are not settled. It advances a case against traditional quantitative/qualitative or even mixed-method debates, and their preoccupation with method over subject (Denzin, 2010). Problematically, while traditional qualitative-quantitative methods may produce clear numbers and compelling examples that are valued in relation to rural education and rural education policy, each is imbued with subtle meanings and perceptions that shape that very research and its conclusions (Duffy, 2010). The subtlety of such influences necessitates a reflexive approach to research as advocated by Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in order to foreground, and work with, researchers’ pre-conceptions of and experiences with the rural, so that their influence can be understood whilst also guarding against relativism and parochialism. As Stehlik (2001, p. 41) suggests, “we need to recognize just how important meanings of place are to people and not to just dismiss those meanings in a structural analysis which denies their own experiences and their own narratives”.

Such an orientation towards a mixed-method approach to researching rural social space; places the focus on the problem being researched, in and of itself, as a key epistemological orientation to the methods and data analysis employed. Focusing specifically upon the use of rural space, Madsen and Adriansen (2004) explore the philosophical and methodological interplay when different data and methods are combined. Their ensuing focus upon philosophy, the researcher’s ontology and epistemology, and how it influences researchers’ choices about which questions, data collection and method, indicates the centrality of the problem, its construction by the researcher, and the importance of maintaining its centrality through all stages of the investigation. Using this approach, we suggest here a philosophical position informed by a spatial understanding of the rural and social justice.

This approach recognizes that rural spaces and places are constructed through the ‘trialectic’ of perceived, conceived and lived space (Soja, 1996) on multiple, and intersecting, scales and within unequal power relationships. Putting this philosophical position to work in investigating the problem of perpetual rural educational (under-)achievement first requires the researcher to establish that an achievement gap exists through the use of the available data, and then the re-orientation of this data away from
the original purpose of large-scale statistical comparison. In this second step, the data is reconfigured to investigate the characteristics of achievement in rural places. Interpretation and meaning-making of such data requires ethnographic work to understand the interpretations, experiences and aspirations of rural communities, across their general similarities and among their particular differences. Crucially, though, because ethnographic and quasi-quantitative methods are deployed reflexively and simultaneously in relation to the problem being investigated, insights from the data recursively influence avenues of ethnographic investigation, just as such investigations influence the re-orientation of data.

Gruenewald’s (2003) critical pedagogy of place perspective is important here, as it implores teachers, and also researchers, to critically examine the influence of established, and powerful, methods on the construction of the rural. Such a disposition to research melds well with Howley, Theobald and Howley (2005), who argue that rural meanings and perspectives are an essential component of rural education research, and that these meanings are often lost in the focus on positivist research to influence policy and practice. Following Nespor (2006), this approach believes that centre-periphery dynamics need to be reconsidered, along with a form of particularism of method. However it does so by arguing against methods that erase the particularity of places in favor of a situated approach. This critical pedagogy of place perspective highlights the hegemony of science-based research and neoliberal influences that deny the social and cultural particularities of places. It is not so much that rural research needs to be about valuing rural lifestyles (Howley et al, 2005) but, rather, about valuing particularity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Nespor, 2006) and rejecting universalism (Denzin, 2010). To achieve this, researchers need to acknowledge and understand the particularity of the rural lifeworld, and not universalize or pre-position the rural by using methods that erase the distinctness of rural places. This is the productive tension in which rural research methods can emerge to better enable us to understand the social world and the influence of globalization and neoliberal agendas on it, and on rural communities in particular. In this way, we can move from simply knowing the rural to using that knowledge effectively.

The primary problem in studying the rural is the difficulty in defining what the site of study is, due to it being a socially constructed space with competing and layered conceptions of its meaning and value. That is also its greatest opportunity, however, as the value of studying rural places is in fact within the problem of method and the difficulty in defining the rural: namely, that the multiplicity of rural places and perceptions of the rural remind us of the forces that have become otherwise invisible, and that inevitably place matters. Much rural research uses the theoretical tools of place and situated practice (e.g. Gruenewald, Green, Sobel, Smith, etc) in their analysis of teaching, educational policy, and rural education more broadly. Thus these ideas are not new to the rural education community as theoretical tools; however they are not often applied to research methodology, or used in relation to rural meanings.

A difficulty in recognizing the rural in policy is that there are many competing definitions of the rural, many of which differ on terms of geographic determinations, economic basis, or cultural definitions (Cloke, 2006). Donehower, Hogg and Schell (2007) however transcend these concerns to arrive at a definition that combines quantitative measures,
including statistics, with geographic and cultural aspects, thereby allowing the rural to be identified as a distinct entity with distinct characteristics. This use of objective statistics and the physical features of geography along with a recognition that culture also exists and is related to both of these conceivably satisfies the concerns of the various policy interest groups. Taking this approach further, Reid et al (2010) propose a model of *rural social space* that links demography, economy and geography as key considerations for policy. In so doing, the connection between local industry, be it pastoral or irrigated crops, or mining, the geography that enables or constrains it, and the subsequent impact on the population make-up, are all interlinked. Thus, sparsely populated grazing land is clearly seen as having different needs to more densely populated irrigation regions. As a result of geography and economy, some areas are more densely populated and more affluent, and thereby afford greater social and economic opportunities. This in turn influences students’ understandings of the world through their experiences, but also mediates their expectations and aspirations (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010).

In terms of education policy, an approach that puts the rural at the centre would necessitate a de-coupling of schools from central, urban-based, bureaucracies and greater scope for the local interpretation and implementation of broad policy objectives. This would challenge policy makers to re-think the measures upon which the rural is determined to be disadvantaged, as well as re-thinking the standard policy responses. Deploying ideas of spatial justice in this way ensures that the material effects of space and the particularities of place are foregrounded, and not simply described without explanation through geographic process, as noted by Thomson (2002) with regard to what she calls geographies of distinction. Such an approach also rejects Smith’s (1994) idea of social justice as spatial equalization. Instead, it sets up the preconditions for teachers, and indeed researchers, to employ a critical pedagogy of place as advocated by Gruenewald (2003) and others, so as to recognize the placeless forces that impact upon particular schools, and to respond in relation to the particularities of the places in which they live, work and perhaps study.

Drawing upon Soja’s (2010) account of modernity as primarily about urbanization and the development of the urban-industrial state, and Foucault’s (1984) view that the city was the organizing principle for the governing rationality that was to apply to the whole territory, we argue that rural meanings have been overlooked as valuable ways to understand the modern global world. That this global world values cosmopolitan ways of being, themselves inherently urban and without any spatial awareness, further ensures that the rural is judged against values of the urban and positioned in a binary from which it cannot escape. This interconnectedness between modernity, urbanization and governance also goes some way to accounting for the metro-centric nature of education in Australia. However, as Soja argues, this urbanization has been the catalyst of inequality, as urbanization has been spatially organized through the distribution of capital in urban space; as such, there results a geographic distribution of advantage and disadvantage throughout urban space. While Soja deals almost exclusively with the urban environment, his analysis holds on a broader scale, as inherently, if modernity is an urban phenomenon, the rural is positioned as antiquated and not the recipient of modern benefits of industrialization. The capital benefits of modernity are distributed in cities along major transport routes and hubs, such as ports, where industry is located. There is
then a subsequent geography of urbanization in relation to this distribution and social advantage.

**Varieties of Rurality and Urbanity**

Employing notions of scale, when Australia is viewed as one politico-geographic space there is a clear spatial distribution of advantage, with wealth concentrated in the various state capitals. These capitals are located in the coastal strip of each state such that overall the vast majority of Australia’s urban settlement, and its wealth, is located along the south-eastern edge, and the south-western corner of the continent. Nearly exclusively, the coastal strip adjacent to the state capitals contains the majority of the state’s population; for example NSW is dominated by the state capital of Sydney, with the next two largest urban centers of Wollongong and Newcastle being essentially satellite cities of Sydney from which many commute each day only 84 and 160 KM away respectively. Interestingly, however, the centralized nature of state bureaucracy results in other contradictions, where for example large towns and schools in North-Eastern NSW are closer to the Queensland capital city (ie Brisbane) 100KM over the state border than Sydney 850KM away, although they are unable to access Queensland services.

Educationally, in terms of access to professional development and other resources, these schools are more isolated than some remote rural schools, as they are not considered disadvantaged or isolated in the usual terms of sparse populations and economic disadvantage.

While it is generally accepted that cities contain a geographic spread of wealth and social advantage, generally from the more advantaged city centre to less-advantaged outer suburbs, the rural tends to be regarded as one social and economic entity. Certainly in Australia much of the inland is comparatively less wealthy and subject to various social and educational disadvantages (Green, 2008; HREOC, 2000); however, as Green and colleagues demonstrated in the example of NSW, these geographies are themselves not uniform: there exist various layers of influence, with some small rural villages in the proximity of large rural towns benefiting from the economy of the larger town while others do not (Green [Ed], 2008). Thus we get a picture of various intersecting scales of educational advantage: nationally, from remote to urban, and inland to coastal; State-wise, from rural to capital, large rural towns and their satellite villages, and the distance out from the capital in terms of centralized bureaucracies; city-based, in terms of inner city-outer city and geographic distribution of capital across suburbs. These various scales challenge us to rethink the assumption that geographies of distinction are a metro-urban phenomena and to consider distinction on a larger scale. This scale needs to also be referenced against time, given that the compression of space-time (Harvey, 1989) in modernity, through improved transport and technology, has worked against a spatial awareness and an appreciation of place. Time has also seen a decline in the relative importance of the rural in the national economy (Brett, 2011). Here the technological innovation of modernity has simultaneously produced efficiencies that challenge rural lifestyles and create economic inequalities, while also enabling people to ‘by-pass’ the rural rather than dwell in it as they travel between urban cities. As social and economic capital is increasingly concentrated in the urban, it stands that those making decision that affect the rural, or researching the rural, have an urban(ist) sensibility, and due to space-
time compression have lost the ability to observe the particularities and subjectivities of (rural) places.

**The Need for Space and Place in Educational Research**

Employing spatial thinking allows time to pause, to dwell upon particularities and subjectivities, and to recognize the affordances of places. The resultant spatial awareness brings into light the limitations of the dominant discourses of social justice, with their lack of awareness of place and pre-occupation with Marxist notions of capital or dominant group identities. Instead, a spatial awareness brings into view the broader notions of capital employed by Bourdieu and allows an exploration of how place, space and social justice interact with rural education. Within this context, we propose that, rather than separating these approaches, there is much to be gained through fostering a conversation between Soja and Bourdieu so as to develop a more nuanced version of spatial justice that acknowledges and incorporates rural places.

Soja’s (2010) recognition of spatiality demonstrates that there are alternatives to the economic and social approaches to understanding inequality. However his analysis is dominated by Marxist views of capital, urban environments and modernity and, as such, is potentially problematic for understanding the rural. Bourdieu, on the other hand, employs an ethnographic subjectivity through his notions of field, habitus, and social and cultural capital that draws attention to the particularity of places and the social construction of places and spaces. In this way, Bourdieu’s notion of field as a force influencing social relations and the interrelated habitus of those living there expands Soja’s (1996) notion of how space is understood as perceived, conceived, and lived.

Brought together, Bourdieu and Soja allow us to expand upon existing concerns about the distribution of economic capital, recognitive or recognitional justice to also include the particularities of places and spaces, and the geographical determination of social and economic disadvantage. As Reed-Danahay (2005, p. 132) observed: “Bourdieu viewed individual lives as taking place within social and physical spaces that are connected to cultural and symbolic capital”. As Soja (2010) shows us, unjust geographies exist and are produced as much by economic forces as by the meanings ascribed to spaces and the identities of people in them (Stehlik, 2001).

This approach takes us beyond a simple recognition of context, recently brought back into discussion by Mills & Gale (2012) after its near absence over the last decade, which itself is confined within SES explanations of economic and cultural capital and their influence on educational achievement. Context, when used in this way, takes an orthodox approach to Bourdieu and draws a somewhat deterministic link between economic, cultural capital and social power that results in a focus upon the deficit and constraints rather than the affordances of places. For example, where Mills & Gale conclude that economic and social factors influence the stances that teachers and schools can take in relation to students, we would instead suggest that such stances reveal a lack of understanding of space and a disengagement with place. Taking such a stance reveals how, in Australian education, the rural is conceived as deficit in relation to a cosmopolitan expectation, and how existing notions of social justice don’t recognize space or place. To expand existing notions of social justice, we suggest a more spatially aware social justice be developed that builds upon Soja’s (2010) spatial justice and
Bourdieu’s methodology to recognize the subjectivities and particularities of (rural) spaces and (rural) places. Such an approach illuminates the ‘disadvantages’ experienced by rural communities, while also pointing to the geographical ‘blindness’ that has allowed spatial concerns to remain unaddressed.

References


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1 While the 'mining boom' has gained considerable attention as the basis of Australia's economy in a volatile international economic period, it nonetheless only comprises a small percentage of the national economy, and employs only a small proportion of the workforce (see Richardson & Denniss, 2011).