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Small schools for equity and inclusion

Scott Eacott



Research Brief

What is the problem?

There are 2,129 schools throughout Australia with an enrolment of 100 or fewer students. This represents **22.3 per cent of all schools**, a significant part of the national school education sector. However, only 2.4 per cent (n=96,657) of all students and 3.8 per cent of staff (n=11,389 FTE) are in small schools. Existing data infrastructures have not evolved to capture the nuance of small schools because their cohort sizes fail to meet minimum thresholds. Therefore, despite representing over one fifth of all schools, they remain somewhat invisible and marginalised in the sector.

Addressing the needs of small schools **necessitates new theoretical and methodological approaches** – and the stakes are high. Failure to do so severely limits our capacity to effectively help government and systems to optimise small schools for equity and inclusion. This means practitioners and policy makers may not be aware of highly influential relations impacting on small schools. In fact, it is quite possible that substantial community and educational costs and fallout could be avoided if critical drivers had been addressed in good time and the necessary data generated to achieve greater decision validity for policies.

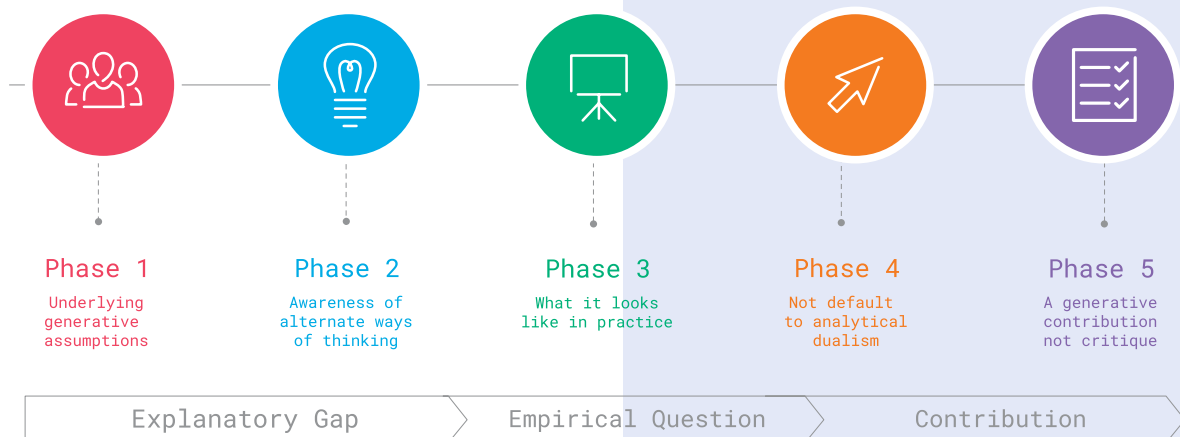
What we did about it

Drawing on a Relational Inquiry into the Provision of Education (RIPE) analytical approach, this interdisciplinary research program aims to:

- Establish novel theoretical frameworks for the design of equitable and inclusive education at scale that can withstand internal and external pressure towards consolidation of resources and cost efficiencies:
- Develop state-of-the-art relational models of the provision of education integrating contemporary and historical data from diverse disciplines to support the functionality of small schools; and
- Generate a body of robust and empirical evidence to inform policy decisions at national and international level on small schools and their role in the delivery of equitable and inclusive education at scale.

Working at the intersection of education, sociology, demography, economics, planning, and leveraging cutting-edge analytical techniques from multiple disciplines all held together through relational theory, this ambitious research program aims to move beyond individual disciplinary based ways of understanding education and its impact to not just inform policy decisions but explicitly contribute to re-designing the provision of education to deliver equitable and inclusive education at scale.

Relational Inquiry into the Provision of Education (RIPE) Analysis



What we found

The constant threat of closure

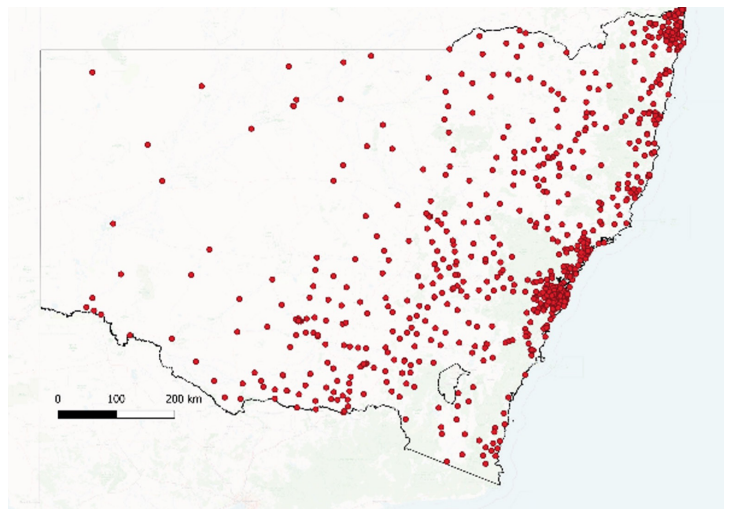
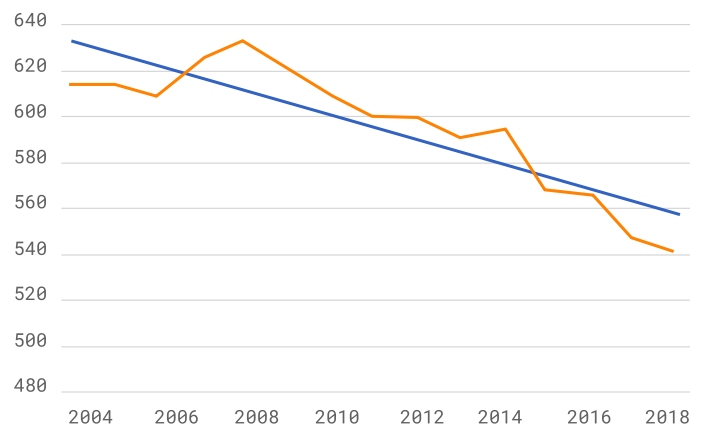
- Since 2010, at least 50 small schools have been closed in New South Wales.
- Similar trends in Western Australia, Tasmania, and South Australia.
- Internationally, closures have been common in China, the USA, Finland, and the Ukraine.

Small schools operate under the constant threat of closure and this speculation has a significant impact on staff, students, and communities.

More than a rural problem

- Small schools are often thought of as a rural problem
- However, small schools are found throughout NSW
- Based on Australian Statistical Geographic Standard categories, 19 per cent of all small schools are in Major Cities, whereas only 6.5 per cent are in Remote or Very Remote locations.

Small schools are not solely the result of geography and require new data points for monitoring their contribution to the provision of equitable and inclusive education at scale.



Educationally

- Small schools are more likely to exhibit characteristics of quality education such as smaller classes, differentiated programs, stronger teacher-students, and educator-community relations.
- They serve some of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in education. The national average ICSEA for small schools is 935 (below the 1,000 median), with 76 per cent of students coming from the bottom half of socio-educational advantage.
- There is a higher representation of First Nations students, and 89 per cent of all special schools are small.

Small schools are fundamental to achieving the equity and inclusion goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, and UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals, including Education 2030 – Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action.

Community

- Small schools are often labelled the heart of their communities and considered anchor organisations.
- They are hubs for social, recreational, and civic activity and a primary meeting point for people.
- Small schools are a catalyst for a sense of community, social cohesion, and building resilience.

Small schools are more than educational institutions, they are fundamental to what we have come to know as community.



Why it matters?

Small schools have been a vital part of bringing education to entire populations. In many parts of the world, they are the only way in which marginalised groups can access education.

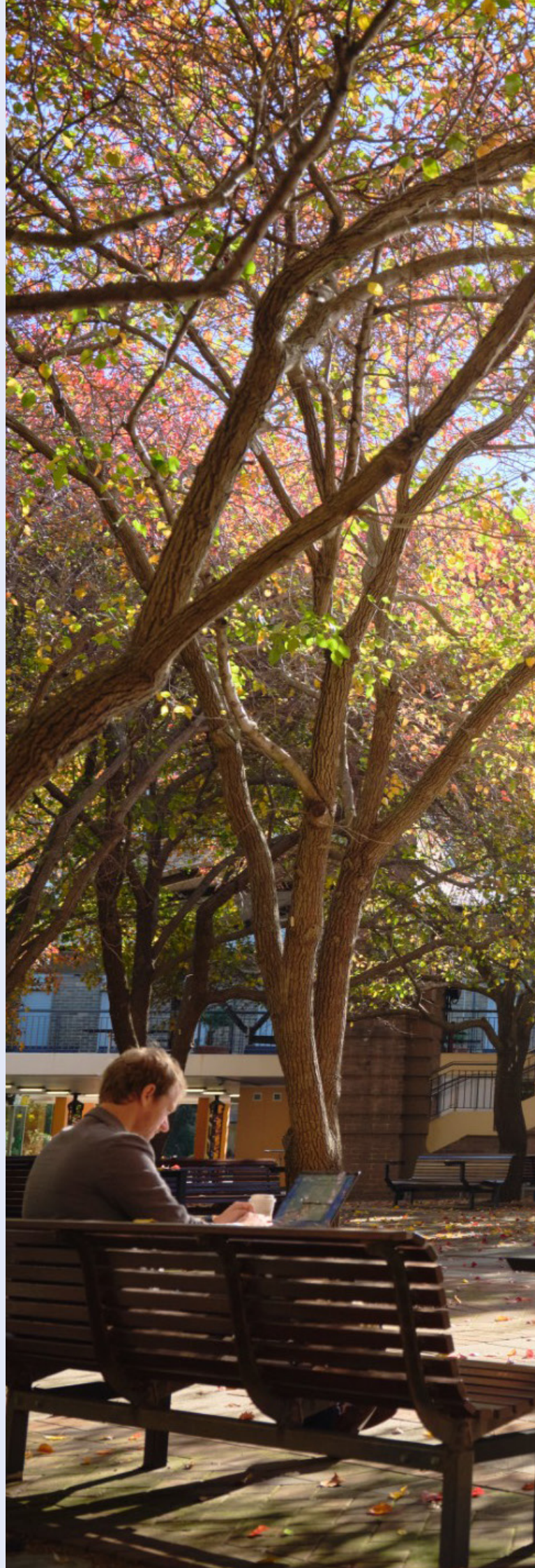
They remain vital pillars for the delivery of equitable and inclusive education for all. Refining existing toolkits and resources for government and systems to better understand small schools and their impact in communities is imperative. This research is a key component in the delivery of such toolkits and resources.

About the Author



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Scott Eacott PhD, is a Professor in the School of Education | Research Fellow in the Gonski Institute for Education at UNSW Sydney and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. He leads an interdisciplinary research program that seeks to develop tools for educators, schools and systems to better understand the provision of schooling through relational theory. His distinctive relational approach that has led to invitations to run workshops and give talks in Norway, Canada, the USA, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, and throughout Australia. Scott has authored > 100 publications, led major research projects (funding \$3.7M) and successfully translated his research into policy and practice. You can connect with him on Twitter @ScottEacott





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