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Abstract

This research investigated the experience of leadership in an isolated school. Data were obtained through structured and semi-structured interviews (Burns, 2000) with a total of eight principals whose experience of leadership in remote communities ranged from new recruits to several decades. Three research questions guided the investigation: What are the social-biographical characteristics of principals in isolated schools? What are the characteristics of the schools? What are the professional and pedagogical aspects of their current position?

The interviews were conducted while the principals were gathered at a central location for professional learning workshops prior to the beginning of a new term. Participation was voluntary with principals who wished to participate making an appointment to meet with an interviewer in a location that afforded the opportunity to speak openly (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009) and with some privacy. The eight principals who elected to be interviewed represented 100% of the principals attending the workshops. The first stage of data analysis involved transcription of the interviews. All responses were then grouped by question, enabling the researchers to see the range of responses to each question. The responses were read and re-read several times in order to establish key themes. The data were then further coded (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007) into various sub-themes. Three broad themes, within which the issue of loneliness was identified, emerged from the analysis: affective factors, professional learning, and professional benefits and challenges. Within each of these broad themes a number of sub-themes emerged and are discussed in detail in the paper.

Introduction

Attracting and retaining staff in remote and rural schools has generally been problematic in Australia (Green & Reid 2004; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004; Roberts 2004; Vinson 2002). One factor in retaining teachers is the quality of school leadership, but recent research has shown that attracting and retaining school *leaders* is also problematic. Three studies, discussed briefly below, identified the challenges faced by school leaders in rural and remote locations: inexperience, workload, professional isolation, and dealing with the competing demands of being an educator and a manager.

In an interview study with seven early career teachers, Graham, Miller and Paterson (2009) explored leadership opportunities for teachers early in their careers and discussed their findings within the

themes of access to leadership opportunities and the nexus of one's personal and professional life in a small community.

All of the teachers in Graham et al.'s (2009) study had been offered leadership positions early in their careers, including one being offered the position of principal in her second year of teaching. However, not all of them accepted these offers, citing reasons including the demands of the position and having observed the 'personal cost' of accepting leadership roles. Those who accepted leadership roles within schools identified challenges including staff turnover, and attempting to develop both mentoring relationships and professional communication with colleagues. A primary reason for not accepting leadership roles was the stated need to gain greater experience as a classroom teacher.

When discussing the nexus of the personal and the professional, Graham et al. (2009) reported that teachers, while recognising the desirability of maintaining a distinction between these two aspects, acknowledged that, in small communities, this was often difficult. In the cases of teaching principals, being the only educational professional in the community, and isolated personally and professionally (also identified by Pietsch & Williamson, 2009, and Novak, Green & Gottschall, 2009) resulted in feelings "of vulnerability and of high accountability" (Graham et al., 2009, p.30). Other challenges identified by those who accepted leadership roles included establishing and maintaining support networks and the impact of making decisions about their own children's education while in a public school leadership position. However, the size of the community presented benefits for some early career teacher leaders, especially the opportunity to develop both a thorough understanding of their students' lifestyles and effective professional relationships with community members.

In a study that specifically investigated new principals in isolated NSW central schools, Pietsch and Williamson's (2009) respondents reported competing exogenous and endogenous pressures. The former were exemplified by finding suitably qualified staff, providing on-site professional learning for inexperienced teachers and leaders, ensuring the availability of an adequate curriculum and providing for increasing numbers of students who required high support needs. Endogenous pressures were concerned with attempting to demonstrate the values and roles consistent with those of a caring profession. In describing their early years as "survival' (p. 86), principals identified work intensification leading to longer working hours and "gave indications of high stress levels and health problems" (p. 86). In addition to feeling professionally isolated (as described above), these principals opined that system level leaders lacked understanding of the competing tensions, which they faced.

The style of leadership in rural schools was one of the foci of the Rural (Teacher) Education Project, undertaken between 2002 and 2005. The analysis of comprehensive interviews with people working in schools revealed evidence of "dispersed, as well as hierarchical, forms of leadership" (Novak et al., 2009, p. 343). In commenting on the diversity of leadership styles, Novak et al. (2009) observed that contextual factors influenced school leadership practice, referring to this as "situated leadership" (p.

343). Similar to Pietsch and Williamson (2009), they also discussed the challenges of high staff turnover, professional isolation (both identified by Graham et al., 2009) and balancing their educational and managerial roles.

Novak et al. (2009) also commented on the difficulty in attracting and retaining school leaders in small rural schools, and the impact of inexperience on those in leadership positions. The following quote neatly summarises what leading rural schools entails.

> Leadership in rural and remote settings is multifaceted, diverse, and place-conscious. The needs and priorities of rural and remote students, their parents and communities in general require skilled and knowledgeable leaders who are aware of their own situatedness, their positionality and, are receptive to the distinctive demands of their own school community, while aware of their role in mediating relationships with outside and beyond – the 'global' (p. 334).

In April of 2009, research was undertaken to further investigate issues of leading in schools located in remote communities in Western Australia's North-West Pilbara and Kimberley regions.

Brief overview of the research

Using an interpretive approach (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006), the project looked into aspects of leading in remote schools. The chief investigators used structured and semi-structured interviews to obtained data on:

1. Background information on research participants: socio-biographical, previous experience in rural/remote schools, reasons for applying for current position.
2. Professional, economic, personal, pedagogical and leadership aspects of their current positions.

Three research questions guided this investigation:

1. What are the socio-biographical characteristics, previous experience in rural/remote schools, and reasons for applying for their current position of the research participants?
2. What are the characteristics of the school in which the participants' work?
3. What are the professional, economic, personal, pedagogical (if applicable to principals with teaching responsibilities) and leadership aspects of their current positions?

From these broad research questions, both structured and semi-structured interview questions were developed to obtain the desired data.

The interview questions covered three specific areas. First, demographic information provided background details about each respondent and the context in which he or she was working. The second area looked at the affective factors for the respondents. These questions included finding out

what attracted people to apply for positions in remote communities, and what they liked and disliked about living in a remote community. Respondents were also asked if they had ever thought about leaving the position they currently held and why they chose to stay. The third area covered in the interviews examined professional factors impacting on the respondents. These questions looked at teaching and learning issues, (if applicable), professional benefits and challenges, and professional learning.

Discussion of findings

Demographic Information

Eight principals were interviewed: three male and five female. The age of the principals ranged from mid twenties to early sixties. Within that range was an even spread of those in their twenties, thirties, fifties and sixties; none were in the 40–49 age range. The range of teaching experience in the principals' group stretched from those who had little teaching experience to others with up to forty years of classroom and leadership experience. Some had been experienced principals in urban schools before accepting a position in a remote school. Others had considerable experience of teaching in remote areas before accepting their current position. Two had become principals within their first five years of teaching.

The schools ranged in size, with the largest having about ninety students and the smallest approximately twenty students. Most interviewees made the point that although there were official numbers of student enrolled at the school, the numbers of students who attended varied greatly. In addition, some schools were hoping to expand student intake by offering specialist programs. The number of staff members also varied between schools. The largest sized staff consisted of ten teachers, while the smallest school had only three teachers.

Class organisation was generally broken down into three groups: pre-primary, junior primary and upper primary. Schools that had the facilities were able to have more classrooms and divide the students into closer age groups. One school had classrooms for each year group and one classroom for high school students in years 8-10. At the other end of the spectrum, one school had only three rooms for teaching and all students from K-10 were in taught in these classrooms.

Many of the schools were at least twenty years old. Some schools had rooms that had been added over the years, so certain sections were quite new, while others were somewhat older.

Affective factors

What attracted principals to work in remote communities?

The reasons that principals gave for applying for positions in remote schools can be grouped into four broad themes: an invitation or encouragement to apply; a love of teaching in remote communities; a desire for personal challenge and change; and a desire to make a contribution. The most common

reason given by principals for applying for the position was that they were encouraged or invited to apply. In four cases these principals had existing relationships with the community through teaching or other work in the community. Others had experience of teaching in different remote contexts before accepting their current position.

Two principals discussed their love of teaching in remote communities. One of them had left for a time, but missed the remote areas and had returned. One principal took on the position because he wanted the challenge and another talked about the importance of giving something back after a rich and rewarding career in teaching, which had allowed her to travel to many parts of the world.

What did principals like and dislike about living in a remote community?

Acceptance by the community was most commonly acknowledged as a favourable factor. One principal commented that he valued the fact that the indigenous culture was strong and alive in the community. Another principal talked about the loving and affectionate nature of the children once you were accepted in the community and the great rewards of working with them.

The beauty of the natural environment was commented on by three principals, two felt that there were family benefits to working in a remote community and two commented on having good accommodation.

When it came to considering dislikes, principals identified lack of privacy as the major issue with five out of the eight who were interviewed identifying this problem. One principal described people knocking at the door all the time and having no time off. This was echoed by another principal who described it as being 'on call to the community 24 hours a day'. A third principal summed it up by saying, "You become very public property."

Four of the principals talked about the emotionally draining nature of the job. In the words of one:

> Often it is emotionally draining – someone has been assaulted or little kids need protection and you have to call the police. You have to be so careful about what you do because it can affect the relationship with the community.

Another commented that the extremes of 'highs and lows' take their toll, but as a principal one is often unable to talk about these issues to other staff members or get away somewhere to relax. One principal observed, "You just go into a house by yourself with nothing but your thoughts." The emotionally draining aspect of the extremes of highs and lows was a point also taken up by another principal who described it as a 'roller coaster ride', and another who said, "There's only so long you can take it [lack of time to ones-self] until you start burning out."

Principals also expressed concerns about lack of access to goods and services. One commented, "It's always when something goes wrong that there's no nurse." Another noted the need for access to a vet. The lack of services often meant that the principal had to deal with equipment failures such as

generators, water pumps and sewerage pumps. One respondent discussed a recent power outage in the community, "We went 36 hours [continuous outage] without power last summer—47 degree heat. If you're on the edge and something like this happens—it can be enough to break you."

Tragedies and disturbing events can happen in remote communities, just as they do in regional and metropolitan communities and schools, and one particular need identified, was access to a counsellor—for both principals and teaching staff. As one principal stated, "In mainstream schools you would have access to a grief counsellor but we just have to muddle on."

Three principals commented on the difficulties created by the heavy rain during the wet season and being cut off for extended periods of time. Two principals noted the high cost of living, specifically high travel costs, and two principals mentioned poor accommodation. The problems were noted as mainly relating to their teaching staff; however, one principal indicated some considerable dissatisfaction with her accommodation stating, "The house we're in at the moment should have been condemned."

Why Principals Thought about Leaving and Why They Chose to Stay

The interviewees were asked if they had ever contemplated leaving their current position and if so, why. All respondents said that they had considered it at some point. The reasons given fall into three categories: exhaustion and stress; staff conflict; and isolation from friends and family.

Exhaustion and stress were by far the greatest pressure points, with five principals giving this as a reason for contemplating leaving their current positions. They spoke of exhaustion and stress caused by behavioural issues with students, the students not appreciating what they did, overload because of lack of staff or high staff turnover, '24/7 input' and the extreme lows when things are difficult. One principal stated, "No matter how much I do there's always more wanted, needed, expected." Another principal observed, "You can't keep the pace up. Getting over-tired, constant interruptions, you can't relax; you almost become shell-shocked." The analogy of feeling shell-shocked was elaborated later:

> Every time there's a knock at the door you jump and think, "Oh my goodness, what's happened now?" I remember back when we were going through a really bad time I was walking through the school when I heard this loud bang and I just jumped and my heart nearly leapt out of my chest and I thought, "Oh Boy! This is really bad." It reminded me of stories you hear of people coming back from the war shell-shocked – it was very much like that.

One principal found it hard to accept the 'waste of taxpayer's money' that sometimes occurred in the community, along with the emotionally draining aspect of seeing evidence of physical, sexual and mental abuse in the children.

Issues of staff conflict were also identified and discussed by the two of the principals. Both expressed their sense of isolation during these times – one asked the question, "Who do I reflect with? How can I make sure that what I am doing is O.K?" A sense of being overly scrutinised in a small community where everyone has to live and work in close proximity was also mentioned.

The interviewees were then asked what had persuaded them to stay. Their reasons were encompassed by five categories: job satisfaction; attachment to the children; attachment to the community; lifestyle; and autonomy, with job satisfaction being the main factor. Principals commented on enjoying the variety and challenges that came with the job. One respondent discussed the satisfaction of being able to reconnect a lot of disengaged students with the school and another noted the pleasure in seeing the students learning.

Four principals also gave attachment to the community as a reason for not leaving. The sense of acceptance by and involvement in the community took time to develop, but when it happened it appeared to create stronger ties that compensated for some of the challenges faced by staff in remote communities. Support and acceptance by the community was manifest in various ways including personal gestures, telephone calls, welcoming back after leave, and invitations to be involved in important ceremonies. However, this was tempered by advice not to interfere with community matters and to accept that change needs to come from within the community.

Lifestyle was an important factor in persuading two principals to stay in the remote community, with benefits like the natural environment and the peace and quiet being listed as advantages.

Professional Learning

The principals talked positively about the professional learning they had received, but all considered that both the quality and quantity of same could be improved. One interviewee discussed the feelings of frustration encountered when needing professional learning on a specific topic, only to find the cost of obtaining such, prohibitive. "Professional development can be frustrating when you need something specific. [It] costs a fortune to get someone in to deliver." Respondents further discussed the need for adequate provision of professional learning for their teachers, but also about the need for different professional learning more suited to *their* needs as managers and leaders. Five of the eight principals had handover time with the previous principal, but only two of these had a 'formal' handover. In three cases it was indicated that a handover was not possible because the previous principal may have been overwhelmed by the stresses of the job and had unexpectedly resigned. Three principals reported receiving considerable or some assistance by telephone from a central office, and help from various departments on an 'as needs' basis. Areas that principals would like more professional learning in were: a better handover, including community-specific information; assistance in financial management; applying for funding; and accountability requirements. Whole school planning, peer networking and staff management were also areas mentioned.

Professional Benefits and Challenges

The benefits perceived by the principals interviewed can be grouped into two main categories: autonomy and team spirit/collaboration.

There was a perception of greater autonomy, although one principal noted that the flip side of this was the need for a degree of confidence. Four of the principals felt that 'team spirit' was a benefit, and three of these had found contact with previous principals at the school valuable.

The challenges discussed by the principals, however, somewhat outnumbered the perceived benefits and can be grouped into the following categories: human resources; physical resources; community and cultural issues; and professional isolation.

Difficulty in recruiting and retaining good teaching staff was an issue for four of the principals, with one of the principals saying that nowadays people do not want to live in 'basic' conditions, but require 'all the comforts'. While some of the staff at schools was fairly stable, often principals were faced with the possibility of 100% staff turnover. It was also perceived as difficult to ensure that those who applied for and won the jobs in these schools were actually the 'best' candidates, with one principal stating, "The school has lots of grad teachers – and that can be problematic". Teachers had been known to simply leave and not return. One principal noted that staffing can potentially be a massive challenge for remote school administrators, stating that "Next year I'll have 100% turnover in staff. That's the challenge that affects all principals—and it's one of our biggest headaches." Another was more blunt when commenting on the possibility of constantly fluctuating staff, "It's a nightmare waiting to happen."

Accessing physical resources is often a responsibility that falls onto the shoulders of the principal. Four principals spoke of difficulties associated with maintaining access to the Internet, to tradespeople, and to power supplies. One respondent whose school was located three to four hours away from a major regional centre further elaborated on this issue, "Tradies charge two dollars a kilometre out here. For us that's a combination of a possibly long wait, and up to five hundred dollars—just for a call-out."

Reliable access to ICT services was also an issue for one principal, who stated that until recently, he had been spending sometimes up to 20 hours per week on the telephone trying to resolve internet connection problems with their service provider, although thankfully, he had recently found a more reliable provider. On the flip side to this issue the respondent also commented that both broadband services and prices were becoming much more reliable and cheaper respectively.

Four of the principals found that cultural issues of the community members, parents and children presented challenges to them as principals. Tensions between different groups within the community sometimes spilled over into the school. Also, some principals reported that they were expected to

perform community functions such as picking people up from the airstrip, being in charge of the community's medical chest, and such like.

Professional isolation was seen to be a challenge by four of the principals. One noted that 'the buck stops with the principal' and that he was very aware of the level of responsibilities. Three principals felt it was important to shield staff members from a range of community stresses, but some had nobody to turn to for support in return.

Summary of the Findings

In terms of experience, interviewees were characterised by a wide range: from first appointment to almost four decades. Common reasons for applying for their current positions included knowledge of someone in or a previous relationship with the community, taking on a challenge, a desire to make a contribution and enjoyment of teaching in remote communities.

Respondents discussed their enjoyment of living in a remote community; including accommodation, community acceptance, lifestyle, and the natural environment. Dislikes included lack of access to goods and services, cost of living, poor standard of accommodation and lack of privacy. Strongly related to lack of privacy, was the sense of being 'on call' twenty-four hours a day, and the loneliness of being a leader due to a lack of peer interaction during which challenges of their position could be discussed with colleagues.

In discussing why they might leave their current position, interviewees referred to exhaustion and stress, staff conflict and isolation. On a more positive note, common reasons for remaining included job satisfaction, attachment to the community and lifestyle.

Principals commented on a number of professional factors for which they thought they were either underprepared or found challenging. These factors included issues relating to recruiting and retaining staff as related to human resources, isolation from principal colleagues, undertaking community functions and managing community tensions.

Respondents also discussed the professional learning they had received which included some 'positives' – although an effective 'handover' from the previous principal was not always in evidence. They also identified areas in which they would welcome more assistance: notably administrative issues concerned with accountability and leadership specific areas such as whole-school planning, staff management and peer networking.

Four common areas of professional benefits were identified by the interviewees: team spirit and collaboration, opportunities for professional growth, autonomy and community relationships.

Observations

This small research project has identified that the school leaders interviewed are attracted to remote schools primarily because they want to make a difference for the children who live in these isolated communities. They referred to the enjoyment of taking up a challenge and the enjoyment of teaching and leading in remote schools. However, when analysing the responses to the questions about what they enjoyed and found challenging about teaching and living in these isolated schools, paradoxes became apparent in that the reasons for one, were also the reasons for the other. In other words, the same 'pull' factors identified, were also seen by many of the respondents as 'push' factors that would possibly cause them to eventually make the decision to leave. (This was also very apparent in the case of classroom teachers who were also interviewed, but whose responses form the basis of a separate article). Examples of such paradoxes include:

- The standard of accommodation being identified as both positive and negative aspects of living in remote locations.

- Lifestyle being discussed as an attractive feature, particularly the natural environment, yet professional and personal loneliness, high cost of living and lack of privacy were noted as concerns.

- The enjoyment of having close relationships with the local community was seen to be a positive feature, yet having to deal with community tensions and assuming community leadership roles was considered daunting.

- Similarly, the quality of the professional learning provided was praised, but areas requiring more information were identified.

Recommendations

Overall, the results of this investigation have uncovered some very informative data from which a series of recommendations have been derived.

First, a formal 'handover' period needs to be established for principals and a structure put in place to ensure that this can happen whether the previous principal is available or not. Only two of the eight principals interviewed received this crucially important assistance. Many of the challenges faced by educators living and working in such remote locations are difficult to solve simply because of the perceived financial implications of doing so, however, a formal and structured handover period is, in the opinion of the researchers, something that could probably be achieved with some forward planning. One suggestion would be the appointment of a regional 'Principal Consultant'. The role of the principal consultant would be to make contact with each principal on a regular basis to update essential information about the school and its community so as to maintain the corporate knowledge that ensures the smooth running of the school and its relationship with the community it serves. Centrally initiated contacts may provide early indication of issues where support can be provided.

Principals and teachers both noted that as well as the professional learning on cultural awareness that was provided, there was a need for an induction that was specific to the community they would be entering. Gathering knowledge that is tied to each school and community would help to facilitate the provision of such induction programs.

Second, a principal network system involving both face-to-face and online communication opportunities is developed. Principals commented about the challenges of working in extremely remote locations and the professional isolation that results from this. These respondents were all interviewed at a once-yearly, centrally located conference, and for many this was the only time they met face-to-face in any professional capacity. Whilst the physical challenges of great distance and isolation exist for many of these principals, further thought might be given to the possibility of face-to-face meetings more than once-yearly—possibly between neighbouring communities at first, where distance issues might not be so prohibitive. Another, possibly more practical opportunity for networking already exists—that of online communication. Although internet services were noted by some of the respondents to be less than one hundred percent reliable, this is a technology which is improving globally, at a rapid rate. With recent advances in broadband applications such as Skype and VOIP there appear to be real possibilities to take advantage of this and establish more frequent and formal communication opportunities.

Third, professional learning opportunities for principals are extended to include administrative issues, staff leadership, and staff recruitment and retention. All principals interviewed were of the opinion that more formal professional learning was required in these areas, and the general 'flavour' of responses seemed to be one of being able to obtain some *reactive* assistance in response to problems which had already manifested themselves, rather than that professional learning being more proactive and formally structured in nature. Again—use of ever improving ICT capabilities might be employed to service this need, without having to resort to expensive excursions or incursions.

Fourth, monitoring housing standards to ensure they are consistent and maintenance is provided in a timely manner. Some interviewees commented favourably about the low cost of their accommodation; however this was often tempered by the poor quality of that accommodation.

Finally, this particular research was conducted at one central location over the course of several days, while all interviewees were present at an annual conference. Developing 'in situ' research projects such as this to explore the issues and challenges being experienced by principals might well be a way of monitoring their needs and obtaining much richer data about the complexities of their leadership roles.

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