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Investing in sustainable and resilient rural social space: Lessons for teacher education

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Introduction

Attracting and retaining effective education leaders and teaching staff for regional, rural and remote schools in Australia is a major sustainability and quality issue facing every State and Territory. It is also a major concern in pre-service teacher education, particularly for those universities which have a commitment to rural and regional areas.

There is a strategic link between teacher education and the sustainability of rural communities with earlier suggestions (White & Reid, 2008, p.1) highlighting that “healthy rural communities may be supported via reform of the ways in which teacher education prepares graduates for teaching in rural schools”. Likewise, the proposition is made in this paper that the relationship is importantly reciprocal and that, in turn, healthy rural communities and ‘successful rural schools’ can inform and help reform teacher education and professional learning through the insights gathered into the ways in which rural education leaders and teaching staff work closely with their school communities.

In this paper we draw specifically from the research findings of a three-year Australian Research Council funded project (2008-2010) of schools and communities where sustainable practices around staff recruitment and retention were identified to explore this reciprocal relationship. The paper will firstly discuss the context of the study, its method and conceptual framework, and then focus in particular on the emerging themes from the twenty case-studies across Australia. Themes discussed include the important linking between rural school leadership and community renewal; the possibilities of developing school-university partnerships to sustain the rural workforce; and the need for social and creative enterprise to be acknowledged as important work of rural teachers and leaders. The paper concludes with the implications of these themes in terms of better preparing a future rural teacher workforce.

Researching rural teacher education

A number of recent research studies (Starr & White, 2008; Halsey, 2005; Roberts, 2004; Sharplin, 2002) confirm that rural schools continue to experience more pressure in staffing than their metropolitan counterparts, and yet it is equally recognised that rural schools are more likely than city schools to be positioned as vital to the social and economic network and sustainability of their local community (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Halsey, 2005; Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003).

As Halsey (2005) notes:

Schools are often the largest organization in a town or area.... [They] are strategically positioned to be a rallying agency when the town feels under pressure, providing a sense of connection to the past, with the present, and to the future (p. 6).

It was within this realisation, that a 'one size fits all' and pre-dominantly metro-centric model to teacher preparation and professional learning was not serving well our rural schools and communities, that a team of teacher education researchers across Australia came together to investigate the issue of recruitment and retention of teachers for rural sustainability. In 2008, with funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC), a three-year study began: *Renewing Rural Teacher Education: Sustaining Schooling for Sustainable Future*. The project has now come to be known as TERRAnova (renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia).

TERRAnova

In the Australian context, rural teacher education is neither high-profile nor well resourced (White et al., 2008), nor is it well-understood (Green, 2008). Clearly it was important to question how to address this issue. Key questions that have thus informed the development of the study are:

- What makes rural teaching an attractive, long-term career option for Australian teachers?
- In what ways can rural communities, education systems and teachers work to encourage and nurture teachers to work in small rural communities throughout Australia?
- How does the physical and social space affect teachers' work in rural communities?

Overall, the TERRAnova project has worked from the premise that there is a significant need for teacher education to work with a focus on understanding place and adopting a place-consciousness (Grunewald, 2003) approach if it is to assist in staffing rural schools. The research design comprised of three components exploring both pre-service teachers' responses to university and State-based rural incentives and a study of those schools that appeared to be going 'against the trend' of the 'staffing churn', as identified by Roberts (2004). The data collection comprised:

- An annual national online survey for pre-service teachers who have taken up university and state incentive schemes for rural teaching experiences.
- A longitudinal follow-up study of teachers who have taken up positions in rural and remote schools, with follow-up focus-group interviews each year.
- Compilation of a set of case-studies of rural schools identified by communities and systems as successful in retaining good teaching staff.

The third component of the research design and findings, on which this paper focuses, stemmed from the opportunity to examine those schools and communities, which were deemed 'successful' in both attracting teachers and maintaining a stable staff. We decided to develop case-studies of these sites which would act as detailed accounts of practices in schools where teachers have remained and worked effectively over time. Measures of 'success' included a staffing mixture of beginning and experienced teachers, stable leadership and, in terms of retention, beginning teachers who had stayed for three years or more in the school.

It was important that the schools were selected by a process of community and system nomination. As such, a national radio announcement strategy was implemented in mid-2008 to both raise awareness of the project and highlight the nomination process. In response to this call, a total of 50 schools from across the nation were nominated, with Figure 1 highlighting the location of all these nominations.

The Principals of these nominated schools were then contacted, provided with full details of the expectations and commitments and invited to participate in the study. Ethics approval had been obtained by the Universities and individual education authorities, with some of the latter requiring the specific names of schools and in other States an overall acceptance provided.

In some cases Principals were not willing to participate, even though the premise of the study was to investigate their successful recruitment and retention strategies. This in itself is an interesting dilemma faced by us in the TERRAnova team and by researchers who work in rural and remote communities with the desire to positively contribute to the places they write about. One School Principal reported to a TERRAnova researcher that their school had decided not to have any more researchers in their school “as it was too disruptive and that they felt they had been researched to death without any return to their community”. It was this negative view of rural researchers that prompted us as a team to ensure that each school community, via their Principal, received their own individual case-study report to use with their community as they saw appropriate.

A few schools that were selected did not meet the relevant criteria as set out above: for example, one school nominated by its community was a single-teacher school where the teacher had been at the school for longer than 15 years. We also considered the appropriateness of selection of those schools that had been nominated in coastal communities. Although the coastal schools were in designated rural places, there was some argument that these schools often faced less pressure to recruit teachers than their fellow in-land communities as a consequence of the attractiveness of living near the coast. We decided therefore, on the whole, to focus our attention on inland Australia, and so predominantly the case-studies reflect this dynamic. We finally ensured that there was an even distribution across most States and Territories, spanning the depth and width of the nation. In total, 20 schools and their surrounding communities were selected and agreed to participate in the study. All the case-studies have since been given a pseudonym and this is used wherever possible.

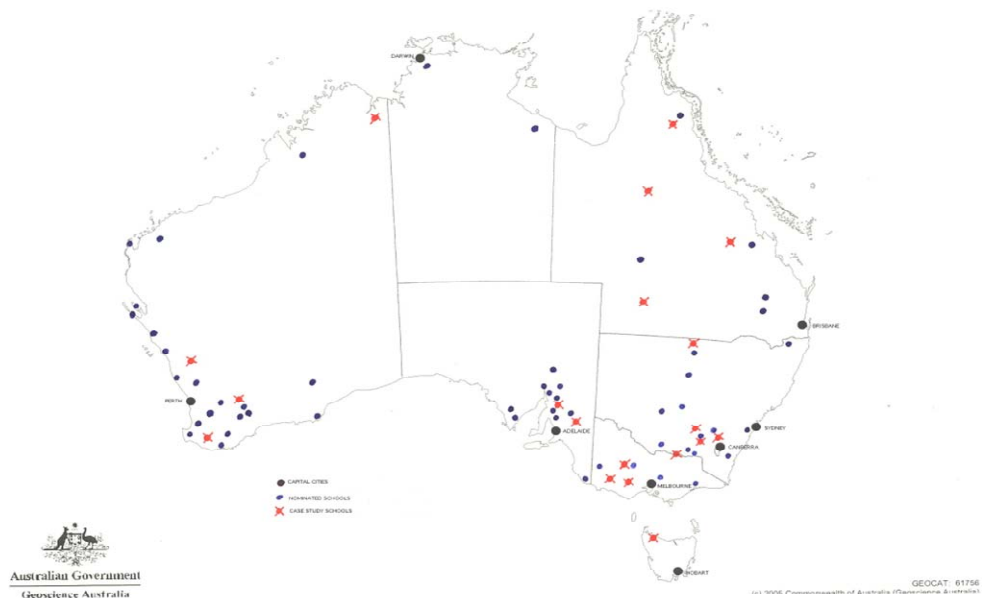


Figure 1: Map of location of selection of all nominated schools and case studies.

Each case-study involved five of the researchers completing four case studies each. The case-studies were completed over 2009 and finalised in early 2010. TERRAnova team members travelled to the nominated schools and their communities by car or where necessary by air, and stayed for a period of up to three days, to enable a good cross-section of school and community interviews to take place. The case studies occurred in a range of rural communities, from small dairy farming to remote mining and from old timber landscape to wide open wheat fields. Some schools were located in towns that in essence had become mainly service towns, linking the cities to the producers. Many of the communities had suffered over considerable time from drought and loss of traditional farming jobs. Some were in very poor areas with large unemployment and some were in historically wealthy grazing communities. The size of the towns ranged from populations of as small as 50, with children largely bussed in from further afield, to a town of approximately 10,000. All were located some distance from the nearest capital city.

The analytic work of the study has emerged across the diversity and range of rural places and people we met as we have tried to understand what has worked to keep teachers in rural communities. This analytic work has underpinned the conceptual model of 'Rural Social Space' (Green, 2008), as illustrated in Figure 2. This theoretical framework appears to be a usefully strong form of knowledge for the *preparation* of rural teachers developed from the sociological and environmental literature.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the concept of 'Rural Social Space' is useful in considering the three key interrelated factors of economy, geography and demography of a particular place as connected in and through social practice. As Reid et al., (2010) highlights, it is the *practice* of place that provides and produces social space, and the ways these factors interact and interrelate suggest that rural social space can be rethought and represented in ways that do not produce symbolic deficit in relation to rural teaching.

Rural Social Space

The working model in figure 2 conceptualises rural social space in terms of the practices that are produced in and through the interrelationship of these factors in any particular place. It is the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time. Rural social space is represented as situated within a network of government policies relating to, and governing the practice of people, place and profit in any location, and in this way the model illustrates the significance of the rural to the sustainability of the nation as a whole (Reid et al., 2010).

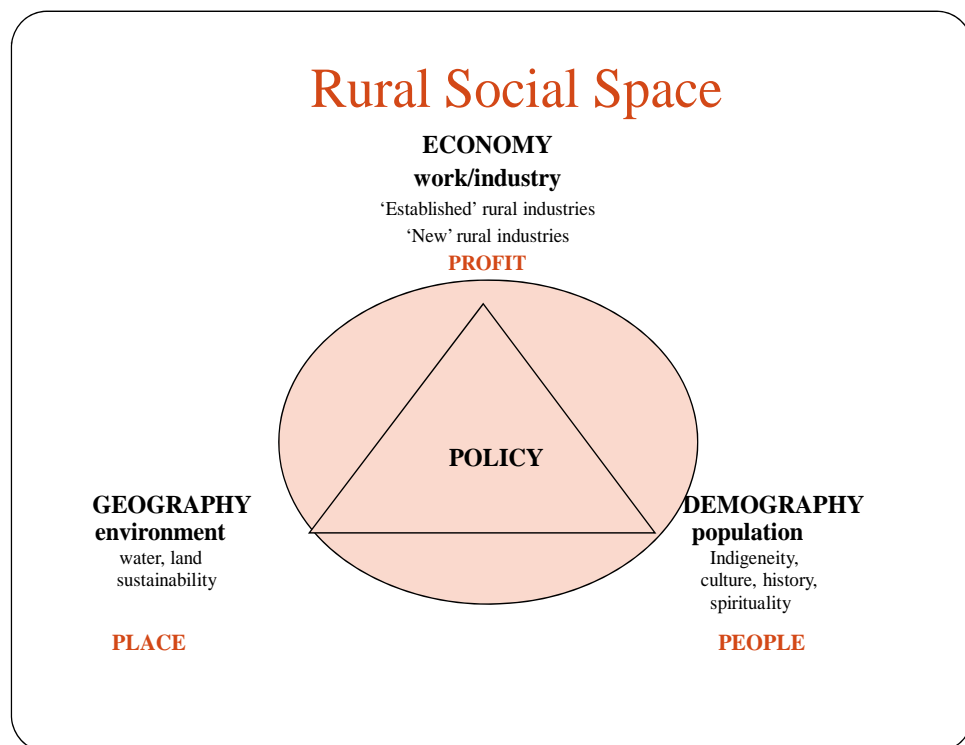


Figure 2: A Rural Social Space

Data were collected about the ways in which society and space interact via semi-structured interviews with a range of school-selected participants. From these interviews, we as researchers were frequently directed to 'go and talk to so and so – they will tell you more about that'. As an example, one researcher was sent on a constant trail of key people who each contributed, layered and added different perspectives of the success stories across the entire town. Many of us also had the pleasure of being stopped in the street and, then once an explanation of the field trip given an invitation to share a drink and chat provided. Interviews occurred in the many various community places as is the example of one researcher who found herself invited to sit under the cool of a tree to speak to a local family while the children played nearby.

Overall we interviewed a variety of people, including members of the school leadership teams, experienced teachers, beginning teachers, parents, social and applied health workers, chaplains, tourism managers, Shire council members, Parents and Citizens representatives, regional leaders and community members, as well as collecting a range of photographic, print and other media documentation of each site. Immersing ourselves in each site was clearly not just about the location and landmarks that defined the community

or about the people, but rather, the embodied sense of the social space created between the two.

The range of data has been analysed and the case-studies provide examples of how rural schools and their communities invest in the development of one or more dimensions of a rural social space – demography, economy and geography – and some with a particular focus on one aspect and others, with combinations that produce their own social space. To further illustrate, we discuss the various dimensions and what emerged overall as an ‘investment’ in rural social space that made these sites successful.

Investing in people

Consistently, the case-studies indicated these schools were ‘successful’ as they demonstrated a clear investment in the people (demography) in their rural places (both the staff and community members). It was often a School Principal (in some sites it was another significant leader in the school and or community) who demonstrated both the social and creative entrepreneurial skills to attract whatever resources (human, technical, economic, physical) that might be necessary to sustain and support staff and beyond. We use the word ‘social’ to explain the enterprise because the attitude of these leaders was characteristically to attract resources and network for the social profit of their school and community - it was not for individual economic gain. This social entrepreneurial ‘culture’ often flowed on to the staff and community members who in turn ‘invested’ in others through mentoring or supporting each other. In some of the cases, the investment was a very small token: for example, in the case of one school, the local groundskeeper who lived next to the school had set up a small fridge and table under a large shady tree and offered this place as an opportunity for teachers to gather to debrief and reflect together away from the public view. This small gesture meant that staff had a place to quietly and privately de-brief and reflect and share a drink on a Friday afternoon away from the public bar. When rural teachers often find the constant gaze and scrutiny of their personal and professional lives confronting, this small gesture and large tree contributed significantly to the overall feeling that there was a place where the teachers could talk together, and the significance of the ‘tree’ to the retention of staff came through in almost all the transcripts from the staff.

In another case, the Principal put into place creative and flexible staffing combinations to both support beginning teachers and experienced teachers, as well as to be able to respond quickly to changing student numbers without the loss of staff. . Importantly, knowing the impact that the loss of just one family from the district can have on overall staffing, the Principal and teachers in the school took the attitude that all the children in the school were their responsibility and, as such, while students were grouped in particular ways the staff combinations who taught them remained flexible and together they worked to teach across the levels. Each year, the team collectively were involved in the best way to resource and maintain staffing levels and buffer themselves against the impact of movable staff: student ratios.

One of the more memorable quotes from an experienced teacher highlighting the school's investment in a beginning teacher was when she simply stated "When you come to here you come with your whole self". In further unpacking this statement, it was revealed that this view was collectively shared by each and every staff member, and to them it meant that as a teacher, it is worth investing in knowing the 'whole' person, their family and background and their skills and strengths. It emerged as a significant factor in particularly retaining this newly qualified teacher, who could have been at the risk of feeling very marginalised or pressured to behave in culturally stereotypical and gendered ways, so that instead he felt valued and part of the team:

When you come here you come with your whole self. We are aware that your family and your friends are an important part of your life and they help you be the teacher you are and so we have to recognise that involvement you have with them. And on many occasions we can incorporate the expertise of your family and friends into the school life and this happens on a needs basis; it's not timetabled or programmed, but people are very generous with their time, and quite often it's not just the teacher who works in the school, but there's a definite positive impact from their family and friends too (Experienced Teacher)

Another example of leadership and investing in people in the community was the case of Forest, where the leadership model was also very open and allowed for communication across the staff:

Yeah ... well the leadership team here has been pretty stable for us in recent times. It's well regarded and Kasey [the Principal] has a good reputation not only within the school, but also within the wider community she is well known. The family has been here for many years. And as I said I think the school has developed a reputation where parents and community members feel there is a two way communication process. So you know I think the people are not only comfortable with the school but also the leadership program and leadership team. So there are some really exciting things happening here and I think that Kasey's aim is to make this sort of a hub for the region. In terms of education and in that respect and yeah I think that the quality of people she can attract has been fantastic.

Another dimension of the investment into people was that, in four of the case-studies, the Principals had actively sought to build a link between their school and a partner university, even if it was located some distance away. The view such a partnership from the Principal's and teachers' point of view was that it would offer an increased level of awareness to pre-service teachers of the benefits of living in rural communities. The partnership was also identified as a strategic way to draw the university resources into their school community. One Principal highlighted setting up a stall at one of the University Open Days, to showcase the benefits of a rural career and also providing incentives for pre-service teachers to participate in additional professional experience opportunities:

That program [professional experience] went over well and we were always under the thinking that if we did that well then they [pre-service teachers] might tell five other people each that they had a good rural experience and we were looking at a picture beyond our school, just rural in generalYes, and we found them

accommodation and got a couple of petrol vouchers some of the time they were here. So some of the time it didn't cost them anything in fuel and accommodation was covered every time. As far as activities, some of them were up in the scrub doing things that the uni said they didn't want to know about. That was the whole idea to give them a taste that it's not just football club, there's more to it here".
(Principal)

Investing in economy

As highlighted in a previous paper (White et al, 2009), in many of the communities there was a clear investment by the community into their own survival and, beyond that, revival. While this pattern might not at first appear to directly relate to a school's successful recruitment and retention of staff, it was fascinating to see the connection between the successful schools and those communities who literally fought hard to renew themselves. Consistently, we saw places who actively sought 'new' rural industries to attract new families to their school and, in turn, new teachers. Here is the example of Forest:

The town really had to re-invent itself from about 8 years ago when the government stopped the forestry. When the industry closed down it was sort of oh geeze {sic} what do we do now you know it was a big deal....a lot of people left town and we thought it was going to affect the school and all of that but apparently no it didn't. You know one thing closes and then another one starts up. (Community member)

One of the community members describes the history as follows:

Absolutely, years ago we had, you go back 20-30 years ago we had the timber mills that was the biggest producer of the area now since the timber industry has changedwe realised we had a very similar climate to what France has got and parts of Europe with that very similar sort of climate. So new (industries) started establishing and these sort of vineyards and they have been very successful with these vineyards and it is nice, very unique.you have now got the Truffles which is that new industry that has just started up, you know probably about three years ago that started up and now it is starting to get into the full swing of it and yeah that is attracting a lot of people .

In another case study (River), the community invested in new staff via the development of a series of townhouses. The new housing attracted rural professionals and new teachers and provided both privacy and a sense of community. This community initiative reflects the understanding of the importance of providing safe and secure housing.

Two cases further highlight investing in the economy of a town. The first case (Noll), located in a low socio-economic community, and the other (Market), in a stable, middle-class community, both sought and achieved grants. Noll, facing the issue of increasing unemployment and poverty in their town and impacting on student learning, successfully applied for a philanthropic grant aimed to better support their families who were struggling to pay bills and stay in employment. This school has since achieved State recognition for

their excellence in community-based initiatives and built on this success for further larger community-based projects.

Market, on the other hand, placed financial resources as an investment into marketing their town as an education centre. The four local Schools and the Shire council worked closely with the local tourism centre to develop a recruitment strategy for the growth of their town and put together a series of short advertisements of the merits of living in their community. These short advertisements, filmed using local families, in turn have become a way to attract and recruit rural teachers to the town.

Investing in place

It was interesting to note that many of the case-studies were located near water, with a few situated near in-land rivers. Many communities, however, had actually invested in their own place and built human-made lakes and water features. When asked about the reasons for such investment, community members discussed that they had wanted to make their places 'attractive' for people to live and work. While they identified they might not be able to compete with beach locations, they believed the investment of a water feature in their town was deemed important in providing additional activities for the community to participate in.

The majority of the communities also actively marketed and promoted their communities as great 'places' to live and work, based on the surrounding features of their place. What is deemed as 'beautiful' is highly subjective, but regardless of the vast diversity of the landscapes of the case studies, it was the place that people identified was worth investing in and promoting. School and community members talked of what kept them in these places. They used phrases such as 'there is beauty in the landscape', 'I love the clean air', 'I like the sense of openness', and 'the colour of the dirt is unique to our place'. Many of the Principals were keen to highlight the benefits of the physical place and the opportunity to participate in a range of what the landscape had to offer:

We are only one hour from the Mountains and so you can camp and bushwalk (Principal)

Conclusion

There are many more stories and examples of investing in sustainable and resilient rural social space to share from across the twenty case-studies, and the ones included in this paper are just some of these. They are, however, an opportunity to consider a concept of Rural Social Space and to return to the original proposition of what these case-studies can offer teacher education and professional learning.

In summary, the main patterns emerging relate to:

- a particular model of rural school leadership, using social and creative enterprise to attract and invest in both staff and community.
- the school and community's collective ability to respond to change and initiate and develop new industry and innovative community practices.

In terms of designing teacher education courses and professional learning, these themes illustrate that a focus on leadership; the need to work with a range of different professions; and the ability and knowledge to attract resources are vitally important in

preparing an effective rural teaching workforce. Currently these are not evident in the curriculum or professional experiences of our teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers need opportunities to virtually and physically experience a taste of these types of case-studies and to witness the important place that teachers hold in their community and the impact they can have on rural sustainability. In short what is required is a focus on place-based teacher education.

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